

AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY: PERSONAL ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

The genre of the personal essay in creative nonfiction affords the writer an opportunity to explore identity, not only by depicting the various roles that the writer plays in life, but also through the literary device of persona, a version of the writer specifically created to narrate the essay. Identity is ever-changing and impossible to render completely. Despite the elusiveness of identity, writers and artists still attempt to recreate it on the page. In this collection of essays, I explored my own identity through both the experiences that have shaped me and the personae I have created to express those experiences.

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My Real Name

I've heard it said that people don't know who they truly are until they reach their mid- to late twenties, that maturity does not really set in until then, and that it's then that people's identities becomes more fixed, more stable. I think there is truth in this.

Looking back, I feel as if the younger "me" was much more malleable, impressionable, able to absorb a wider variety of ideas and experiences. The adult me of today takes better care of myself, but the younger me was more reckless.

When I was in my twenties, I participated in the Jamestown Penguin Plunge. My friends and coworkers thought I was crazy to want to take the plunge. My boss advised against it: too dangerous. After all, I would be hurling my perfectly healthy body into the ocean in wintertime.

With everyone set against me, I wanted to do it all the more.

The first time I plunged was on January 1, 2007. It was unusually warm that New Year's Day, a rainy 50 degrees Fahrenheit. I met up with my friend, Jack, at Mackerel Cove. On the beach, people walked around in just their bathing suits, their skin red-raw from the cold. The penguin theme triumphed wherever you looked: penguin flags, penguin masks, penguin pajama pants and boxers, penguins on cars, penguins on hats, blow-up penguins, stuffed plush penguins, and even a few teenagers wearing just black bathing suits and black bow ties. The crowds were cheering, despite the steady rain. In my pink bikini and snowboarding jacket, I felt silly.

When the countdown hit zero, Jack and I stepped aside from the stampeding

yahoos who hit the water first, then found our place in line and moved forward, high-fiving people who were already on their way out. The water was so, so cold, first on my ankles, then up to my knees. Jack dunked in first. I sucked in a big breath, pinched my nose shut, squeezed my eyes shut, and allowed myself to fall backwards, under, under, completely submerged in the cold ocean, a frigid baptism. I felt as if my mind had separated from my body because it was cold, but after dunking into the water, I no longer felt it. I was so dazed that Jack grabbed my hand and pulled me back towards the beach. I felt elated, as if I could stand around on the shore like that all day. I must have been in shock. I didn't even bother to towel off. People congratulated me as I layered wet clothes over my wet body. Walking back to my car, I had sand in my shoes and salt in my hair, and I just felt so wonderfully happy.

* * * * *

I found my cat on Craig's List and picked her up one summer night in a gas station parking lot off the highway in Attleboro, Massachusetts. Like a drug deal, a surreptitious hand-off.

The woman who gave the cat up was moving into an Assisted Living apartment and was not allowed to keep her. This previous owner was so emotional about having to give her kitty away that she did not want me to come to the house. Her two daughters brought the cat to the parking lot where I waited with my then-boyfriend in his pickup truck. One of the daughters handed the cat over, and suddenly, I was cradling a very soft, very scared thirteen-pound bundle of black fur.

Rummaging through the hatchback-end of the car, the daughter pulled out a dirty blue plastic pet carrier that was broken in one corner. We managed to get the cat inside, but the carrier was too small for her.

The daughter proclaimed that it was really important to her mother that I know the cat's full name, so she scribbled it in pencil onto a ripped piece of notebook paper for me: Sasha Renee Trudeau.

My cat had a middle name.

We didn't linger much longer, there in the parking lot. I took my cat and went home.

The next morning, the carrier went in the trash.

It struck me as odd that Sasha had a middle name. I had never owned a pet before, so I never had the opportunity to name one. On the one hand, I thought it was a little strange, because by giving an animal a middle name, it humanized her, which at that time seemed silly to me. On the other hand, it was endearing. It also seemed special that this cat, *my* cat, came with both a first and middle name.

I obtained previous veterinary history on Sasha and found that she was 9 years old when I adopted her. I didn't particularly care for the name "Sasha," but there was something about changing her name that felt wrong to me, especially given her age. Imagine being called one name for most of your life and then suddenly being called something else. It didn't seem right, so I left Sasha's name the way it was. I made a Facebook account for her with her full name, in case the Trudeau family ever wondered

how she was doing. (They didn't.) I felt that putting her full name "out there" in some way made her name official, while simultaneously honoring her previous owner's wishes.

When I started bringing Sasha to her current veterinarian's office, they listed her as "Sasha Céspedes," which seemed wrong, even though I am her owner / "parent." It was important to me to keep Sasha's original name, because I felt like I was preserving her original identity. I felt that if I changed it, I might be taking something away from her.

Despite these feelings, her name morphed over time from Sasha to Sashabelle to Bella, which all seems acceptable if I think of it as a nickname and not her proper name.

Proper name. My cat has a proper name.

* * * * *

My parents got it wrong. They named me "Heather." I can't even type it, here, without feeling animosity towards both of them. Perhaps if I had been born in the American Midwest, where folks grow up pronouncing, cleanly and purely, every letter of the words of the English language, I might not have minded my name so much. Or, if I had grown up in the highlands of Scotland, where the evergreen heather flower, and hence the name "Heather," comes from, I may have accepted the name I had been given.

But I grew up in Rhode Island, that littlest state that sits sixty miles south of Boston and is about a three hour drive east from New York City. The Rhode Island accent, though in the same family as the Boston and New York accents, is its own unique species. In the name "Heather," that delicate, illusive "-er" sound gets flattened in the

mouth mafia-style, morphing into an “-ah” sound, or worse, an “-uh” sound.

“HEATHUH!” I cringe when I recall my brother hollering for me from another room in the apartment. “Hey, Heathuh! Wheahs Ma?” Our Rhode Island accent uglified my name.

As a child, I also felt like my name should be unique to me. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Many other parents of the 1970's must have thought “Heather” was a nice name, because at Hughesdale nursery school, there were *seven* of us, seven children of about twenty, that all had the same name. I had this idea in my head that there should be no other “Heather” besides me. “Heather” was *my* name, and it didn't make sense to me that other people would have the same name.

Then, the adults at school dubbed me “Heather R.” to differentiate me from the other Heathers at the school. I hated that. I probably wouldn't have minded as much if I had happened to be the one Heather that was just referred to as “Heather,” but I didn't get that lucky. “HEATHER R.” appeared in black magic marker on strips of masking tape, labeling my cubby and my cot. I was compelled to write “Heather R.” on my coloring sheets.

It made me a very angry child, because “Heather R.” was not my name. I resisted. They wanted me to take naps in the middle of the day, and I resisted that, too, bringing a stack of books over to my cot and quietly leafing through *Cinderella*, over and over, as the other children dozed peacefully around me. In retrospect, I think I just wanted to be *me*, whatever that particular *me* was at that age, and because of all of the other Heathers, I

felt as if I couldn't be. So, I began rejecting my name at age five.

Thinking back on these events of my early childhood, it doesn't surprise me that I didn't identify with the name "Heather." I was learning and growing, figuring out who I was and who I would become. Identity in motion. It became increasingly more obvious that "Heather" was a name that just did not apply to me. But when you're a child, there is nothing you can do about it.

* * * * *

It wasn't until high school that I decided to go by my first and middle name together, instead of just "Heather." It hadn't yet occurred to me that I could actually change my name. At that age, I probably couldn't have done so legally. So, I thought I would work with what my parents had given me. I experimented with hyphens: "Heather-Marie." I tried removing the space between the two names, a capital "M" standing awkwardly among so many other lowercase letters: "HeatherMarie." Other girls had compound names, like Mary Anne, so I would too. Except, when you've gone by one name for a really long time, it's hard to get people to start calling you something else.

For a long time I would insist. Whenever people called me "Heather," I corrected them by saying, "Heather Marie." It was annoying, to both myself and the people around me, but by senior year it had finally caught on.

I sang for our high school jazz band. My dress was midnight blue and sparkled under the stage lights. I wore red lipstick and let down my curly brown hair from the tight ponytail I usually wore. Mr. Colozzi, our music director, always gave me a warm

introduction, and when he took the microphone and said my name with such enthusiasm, “Heather Marie Rossi,” everyone cheered as I took the stage. I was reasonably talented and generally well-known as a choir girl, a music student. But when Mr. C. announced my number, I was the proverbial big fish in the little pond. I sang the old Gershwin tune, “Somebody Loves Me,” big-band style a la Ella Fitzgerald. It had a catchy melody, the kind that would get stuck in your head. A toe-tapper. A finger-snapper. It was the kind of song old-timers might whistle as they go about their business, and that’s exactly what happened in the cavernous halls of Cranston High School East that year. I brought Gershwin back to my fellow Thunderbolts. I suppose I made a name for myself.

* * * * *

In my second year of college, I got married. To me, my original family name, “Rossi,” represented my father, someone who had been painfully absent from my childhood. He parented remotely, sending the financial support that the law required, but taking zero interest in me as a person. When I married, I was at a crucial point in my life where I had to make a decision: keep my father’s name or take my husband’s name.

There was power in that choice. Finally, I had control over my own name, my own identity. I had already decided to become someone’s wife. Why not also exchange something meaningless for something that, to me, had a great deal of meaning?

I decided to change my name. I became Heather Marie Céspedes.

The paperwork involved in a legal name change is daunting. My marriage license served as my primary documentation, so with that, I began the long, slow process of

changing my name.

Social Security is the first stop, because many places refuse to change your name unless you have your new Social Security card as proof. After visiting that office, you wait for your new card to arrive via mail. Sometimes weeks. Once you have your new card in hand, the next stop is the Department of Motor Vehicles, where you update your license and registration. When those documents finally appear in your mailbox, you can move on to bigger and better things, like your U. S. Passport, your bank accounts and credit cards, and your employer. Some places accept the change by a simple phone call; other places require forms and copies of your new identification. The name change process is tedious and requires extreme patience, but once it is completed it never has to be done again. In theory.

Despite all of the red tape, I never felt like taking my husband's last name was a mistake. During my married years, I truly became member of the Céspedes family. For seven years, life happened around a kitchen table, over a cup of coffee, Univision on the television in the background. Spanish soap operas during the week and Don Francisco on "Sábado Gigante" every Saturday night. Señora Choni worked at a cake factory, so she would often surprise me with a slice of lemon mousse cake, my favorite. My Spanish was still terrible, so my husband translated most of Don David's jokes, except for maybe a few of the dirty ones, which made us laugh even more.

I was part of a family, with a mom and a dad and two younger brothers. These people claimed me, adopted me as their own in a way that my own family never had. I

became a *nuera*, or daughter-in-law, legally; I became an *hija*, or daughter, in the heart of Don David, my husband's father.

So, at the end of my seven-year marriage, when my husband and I got divorced, I stayed "Céspedes."

* * * * *

In conversation at a family gathering not long after I got divorced, my aunt brought up the issue of my name.

"So, now that the divorce is official, when are you planning to go back to your maiden name?" The question seemed casual enough, but she asked me *when*, as if it were already decided. I didn't know what to say. I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks in embarrassment. I felt caught between what I wanted and what I thought she expected of me. I remember being purposefully, pointedly vague, saying something like, "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'll change my last name again if I ever remarry."

Even though I felt very strongly that staying "Céspedes" was my own conscious decision, I hadn't really thought of how to express that to others. My aunt's question caught me off guard. Not only was I annoyed at her implied expectations, I was frustrated at how inarticulate I felt. Though I felt badly about that, the exchange with my aunt wasn't a bad thing. She always had a way of challenging me to think about things, even if I didn't think about them the same way she did.

I think my aunt sensed my unease, because she gracefully changed the subject.

* * * * *

After college, I landed a steady, full-time job just ten blocks from where my husband and I lived. By this time, I had gotten tired of correcting everyone, tired of forcing an unlikely compound name. As right as “Heather Marie” was in high school, it just didn't stick in adult life. Now that I was making a fresh start at a new place, I seized the opportunity and told everyone my name was “Marie.” I became one of those people that goes by her middle name, even though my legal first name lurked on my license, my passport, and every other document that identified me. It was an ideal opportunity to try on a new name to see how it felt, and I grew accustomed to it quickly. I enjoyed playing the game, “Guess my real name!”

Wasn't “Marie” my “real” name? When I would reveal that my legal first name was “Heather,” I was told time and time again that I didn't look like a “Heather.”

I was simultaneously delighted and repulsed. I thoroughly enjoyed that others could see how wrong my parents had been by naming me “Heather,” but it repulsed me because, what was a “Heather” supposed to look like, anyway?

* * * * *

2010. 32 years old. Sasha/Sashabelle/Bella and I against the world. My husband and all the safety of his family were gone, but with my black cat at my side, I would again plunge into the cold world, risking frostbite, maybe, but on my own terms. And with my own name: Marie Céspedes. According to my lawyer, I had the right to call myself anything I liked, but my court date was nothing like I had imagined.

I was shaking a little when I walked into City Hall, but my friend, Ernie, had

come along to steady me. I was glad for the company, because even though the name change was what I wanted, the task ahead was daunting. On the way to the courtroom, the clacking sound of my heels on the hard stone floor fueled my confidence and made me feel like I was really going somewhere. Sitting next to Ernie on the wooden bench in the courtroom, I was surrounded by important-looking men in suits and ties, holding notebooks and briefcases, but I felt quiet, like a grandma in church, like something holy was about to happen. And it was holy, in a way, because it was my wish. I wanted my wish to come true.

When the judge called my name, I walked up to the front. He was middle-aged, and although he was playing a serious role in my future, he smiled kindly at me to try to put me at ease. He wore a suit and tie. No black robes. Certainly no white wig, not that I really thought there would be one. Though I had never met him before, he exuded warmth and seemed familiar to me, like a distant cousin on the Italian side of my family.

“Why are you here today?” he asked.

“To change my name legally.” He didn’t know the whole story, nor did he need to hear it.

“Do you have any debt that you are trying to avoid by changing your name?”

“No, sir. I just want to change it for me.” He said some official-sounding words, signed off, and handed the paperwork to the clerk.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” he said, smiling the whole time. I received my official copy in the

mail about two weeks later.

Over the years, each time I changed my name, I felt like I was getting closer and closer to *me*, to a name that more accurately represented who I am. Changing my name legally meant taking control of my own identity. Going through with it meant standing up for myself, meant being responsible to myself. It also meant a rebellion and ultimate overthrow of my parents, which felt good. It still feels good.

“Well, I guess that's it,” I said to Ernie on our way out of City Hall.

“It's official,” he said. “Congratulations.”

So we finally arrive at Marie Céspedes.

Grief, Quantified

~

I was once a frequent blood donor, every eight weeks as permitted by the Rhode Island Blood Center. I knew the technicians by name, proud to be their perfect patient. Every donation meant saving three lives at a time. How very heroic.

~

Spinning a small blood sample became routine, as my hematocrit, or percentage of red blood cells, always hovered just at or under the allowable limit. If my blood made the cut, we proceeded. If not, it was raisins, raisins, raisins to build up my red blood cells. In two weeks, I could try again.

Being turned away disappointed me deeply. I thought I had failed. What I had really failed to do was take better care of myself, but I couldn't give myself a break. I felt driven to replenish what my grandmother, dead for several months, had used up. She was dead, but I felt like my donated blood was keeping her alive.

~

In the final decade of her life, Noni depended on blood transfusions. She was tired, fatigued, out of breath. She was pallid, white like linens, like paper.

Diagnosis: low blood count.

~

Red blood cells carry oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. When the hematocrit is low, the body does not get the oxygen it needs. Blood transfusions meant

new life in Noni's veins, bumping up the blood count, making it easier to breathe, returning the rosy color to her cheeks.

~

At first, the transfusions were easy to ignore. Noni was independent, living at home, taking care of things on her own. She mentioned the transfusions in passing, like they were nothing. That's how I thought of them. No big deal.

It occurred to me to donate during her life, but I didn't. Part fear, part frustration. There would be the needle, of course. Plus, I knew she would never receive my blood: we did not share the same blood type.

Soon, she had to have transfusions more often. Once a month. Then, twice a month. Eventually, twice a week. Each time, the donated blood would be "matched" to Noni's blood, to avoid an adverse reaction. The more transfusions she received, the more antibodies her immune system produced. As the antibodies increased over time, it became more difficult to "match" her blood. With every transfusion, her blood became rarer, her own special blend.

By the time Noni was up to twice a week, her body had become a pin cushion. The tops of her hands were perpetually purpled. Being so bruised up, where would the needles go next?

~

My aunt managed my grandmother's care. I helped in all ways possible. I would check on Noni when Auntie could not. If Noni was hospitalized or in nursing homes, I

visited daily. I moved, cleaned, and organized during several downsizing stages of my grandmother's living arrangements. I'd be damned if anyone would think that I'd forsake her when she had stuck by me since birth.

Yet, during my grandmother's decline, it became increasingly more difficult for me to spend time with her. She would repeat things, repeat things, repeat things. I knew it wasn't her fault. Even when she forgot who I was, she was always pleasant and kind.

~

It never bothered me to look: the needle was large, larger than anything ever used for routine blood work, a metal straw with a sword tip that sliced smoothly into the sensitive crook of my arm.

It didn't hurt. It just felt cold, like the blade of a knife, like a drafty whisper across the back of your neck. A thin, red snake would follow the plastic line down to the pint package on the scale below my seat. If donation day found me fully hydrated, the draw would take less than ten minutes. If not, maybe fifteen, maybe twenty. Life, that invisible force, drained out of me. I could *feel* it flowing away.

I would think of Noni, who was by this time deceased. If she had been able to endure the transfusions, I could surely endure the donations. We'd suffer similarly, and this way, I'd give back.

~

It was probably not the best way to grieve.

~

In three years, I gave thirteen pints of blood. Grief, quantified. It sounds good on paper, but it was too much. Donating blood takes a toll on your body, especially if you overdo it.

I'm over Noni's death, now.

I don't donate blood anymore.

When Did This Become Normal?

~

“Your mother, whether diagnosed or not, has an illness, an illness that is genetically mapped into the cells of her brain, an illness that she did not ask for. Your mother's illness is not who your mother is. Try to recognize the difference between your mom and your mom's illness. You're not angry with her, you're angry with her illness, which is beyond her control.”

These are the words of a mental health professional attempting to help me navigate my feelings about my mother.

~

My favorite photograph of my mother sits on my mantel. In it, she is sitting in a sturdy wooden rocking chair with a not-even-one-year-old me on her lap. She's got her arms around me, and my chubby little hand grips her slender pinky finger. Her long brown hair is pulled back into barrettes, and her bright smile sinks dimples deep into both cheeks. She is so young. She is so happy. She's got her little girl on her lap and her little boy on the way. The future is full of promise.

~

My little Italian grandma, whom I called Noni, told me a story once (I was a grown woman by then), that when I was a toddler, she had to bring my mother to the hospital.

I have a vague, very watery recollection of going to the hospital with my mother

that evening. It was strange that we would be brought out at nighttime. I wore my pink bathrobe over my pajamas. Sitting in the back seat of the car, I remember staring at the repeating pattern on the pink bathrobe. Mom wasn't making any sense, talking nonsense, talking to the walls, but she wouldn't go without me and my brother.

Maybe she was afraid we'd be taken away from her.

That didn't happen until later.

I don't remember much else from that night, probably because everything went back to normal again after that.

~

As a child, my family life seemed normal. It didn't bother me that my dad wasn't around, and I didn't know any better with regards to my mom's condition. As far as I knew, everything was as it was supposed to be. It is only during the process of growing up, of interacting with the outside world, that I became aware of more and more clues that there was something wrong with my mother.

The clues were sometimes subtle, like Mom sitting in the apartment with all the lights turned off. Most of the time, though, the clues were sudden, traumatic, life-changing events. Everything would be normal, fine for a while. Then, bam! Then, back to normal again. Until the next bomb went off.

~

Dr. Daniel K. Hall-Flavin of the Mayo Clinic explains that the term “nervous breakdown,” though technically not a medical term, refers to when a person becomes

completely overwhelmed by stress, so much so that he or she is temporarily unable to function normally day-to-day.

~

My Uncle Keith told me that a nervous breakdown, or in my mother's case, the onset of schizophrenia, happens anywhere from adolescence to about the age of twenty-five. My therapist confirms this statement. I am thirty-six. I'm safe. And relieved.

~

Mom's nervous breakdown: my brother and I were little, not even in kindergarten yet. I remember the yellow linoleum floor in the kitchen of our tenement apartment in Providence.

I remember my mother sitting on the floor with her back against the cupboards and her arms hugged around her knees. She was crying. We didn't know why. She had been crying for days. We were kids, we didn't know what to do.

We tried to make her feel better. We sat down on the floor and cried with her. The police officers and social workers came for us the next morning.

~

My brother and I were in the custody of the state for three days. When my mother was released from the hospital, we were returned to her. She was on thyroid medication. That's what she told us. We didn't know what a thyroid was. I think she was lying.

She didn't stay on the medication for long.

~

In 1988, my mother was accused of welfare fraud. They stopped sending checks for a while and started sending notices instead. Definitive, threatening letters that made my mother light up another cigarette and stare off into the distance.

Sometimes, she would take the notices and rip them up into tiny squares. I had seen the homemade confetti in the trash. We couldn't really ask her about it, because when we did, she'd say that "they" were out to get us, and she wouldn't take this from "them."

By this time, I was still too young to really understand what was going on, but I was old enough to be afraid. What would we do without money? Any illusion of security I had previously held had disintegrated.

My brother's friend, Jimmy, asked us who "they" and "them" were. We didn't know. "The government, maybe?" My mother always had a way of talking in circles without actually saying anything. All we really understood was that the checks weren't coming anymore. We didn't know what was going to happen next.

Eventually, a social worker showed up at our apartment, a portly man who smiled at me but seemed uncomfortable about being there, shuffling papers around our kitchen table. He and my mother straightened things out, and the checks started coming in again. Disaster averted. Things went back to normal. Copacetic. Routine.

~

I used to lie to my friends about where our money came from. The kids used to talk about how bad it was to be on welfare and how ashamed people should be if they

were poor. Kids really do have a way of making you feel terrible about things that are beyond your control. So, I agreed with them, went along with their way of thinking. I told them I had a very rich great-grandfather who left us an enormous sum of money when he died. I told them we had it all in the bank and we were living off the interest. I don't know where I heard about interest, and at the time I didn't know what it meant, really. It just felt good to tell people we weren't poor.

~

The illusion of normalcy: at Christmastime, I never felt poor. We had rounds to make to see all of the relatives on either side of the family. We sang carols and ate all kinds of food. There were always lots of presents under the tree on Christmas morning, and I always got all the things on my list. I didn't know until I was older what a tight budget we had, and thinking back, it's amazing how my mother always made it work: bicycles one year, an electronic keyboard the next. Games, clothes, toys. We had all that we needed, and more.

~

Family members would ask my mother when she planned to go back to work. At first, it was supposed to be when my brother started school. As the years wore on, the answers got more and more vague. Whenever something turns up. Whenever something becomes available. As teenagers, my brother and I recognized that, if Mom didn't find a job, we would be in real trouble when we both came of age, because her only source of income would cease.

“Get a job” became our mantra. Why wouldn't she? There was nothing we could say to convince her. We would try to reason with her, to explain that she wasn't thinking rationally, but she'd become dismissive, saying that she was the adult, we were the children, and we didn't know what we were talking about. Frustration would lead to anger. It was often easier to not bring it up, just to keep the peace.

~

“A person who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, and that's what it sounds like your mother has, would be unable to hold down a regular job.”

~

In 1993, the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations made it illegal for people to operate a motor vehicle without insurance. My brother and I knew this and we told Mom. But to her, it was just another way for “them” to control us. She ignored the law. We couldn't afford it, anyway.

The problem happened when she got into a car accident. The police came, took the report. Mom got fined, didn't pay it. Couldn't get the car fixed.

She traded the smashed car in, but she couldn't register the new car without insurance. So she didn't register it.

When my brother and I were teenagers, the apartment complex where we lived changed the rules about resident parking. In order to get a sticker (parking pass), you had to bring your registration to the office to prove that the car belonged there. Mom didn't have a registration. So, she didn't bother.

Eventually, our car was towed away. We never got it back.

~

There were times when either myself or my brother would come home and find my mother sitting in the living room with all the lights off. No television, no radio, no book to read. Just sitting there on the couch in the dark. She wasn't talking to the walls anymore, but this behavior still didn't make any sense.

My brother and I did not think this was normal, but somehow, it became normal. Day in, day out. Friends would ask why Mom just sat around in the dark, and we'd shrug our shoulders.

~

When I was nineteen years old, I got married. There were lots of reasons. We were young and in love, it was our life, and there was nothing anyone could say to stop us. His immigration status was not exactly legal, but our marriage could change that. Finally, I needed to get away from my mother, and quickly. My new husband promised he would take care of me. Marriage was a way out, for both of us.

~

“When a family member suffers from a mental illness, the rest of the family is plunged into chaos. You stepped away from the chaos.”

~

My brother dropped out of high school. He went back and graduated one year late. He pumped gas at a local service station, and worked his way up to mechanic.

When the welfare checks and food stamps ran out, my brother started paying the rent. He tried an experiment, once, to motivate my mother to get a job. He stopped buying food. He described how, when there was almost nothing left, my mother ate spaghetti with ketchup.

It broke my heart to hear it. It broke his heart to tell it.

~

A few years later, my husband and I agreed to take her in. We encouraged her to look for a job, to try to start saving up so that she could be back on her own, again, but she was unmotivated to try to find work. In her bathrobe, she would sit at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and tell us that if there were any jobs out there, employers would let her know.

In the morning, when I would work out to Denise Austin on Lifetime (Television for Women), she would stand in the doorway and stare at me, laughing at times. Here I was, overweight, sweating, executing uncomfortable contortions in an attempt to get back a more youthful physique, and she would laugh and stare. I would yell, "Get the hell out of here!" She would shrug her shoulders and retreat to the kitchen, as if I were the one who was crazy.

~

My husband didn't like it when I called Mom crazy. I didn't know how else to deal with the situation, and obviously, my mother wasn't trying to help herself. I'd tell my in-laws she was crazy, but my husband would cut me off with a harsh look.

"She's your mother," he'd say. "Have a little respect."

~

My husband and I sat down with Mom many times to let her know that she couldn't stay with us much longer and that she needed to find work so that she could generate her own income to take care of herself. "This is my house, too," she would say. How could it be? She wasn't contributing. We would go to work every day to support one another, while she stayed home and smoked cigarettes in our apartment. I reached out to my brother for help. He tried to speak with her, as well.

The talk escalated. She tried several times to hit me, but my husband stepped between us to prevent her.

We tried to have a social worker come to the house to help her, but she was verbally abusive to her.

Finally, I called the police. They took her to the hospital, where she underwent a psychiatric evaluation. It was concluded that she did not pose a threat to herself or others, and she was released several hours later.

Why wouldn't anyone help her?

~

How very frustrating, to know that there was something wrong, something *very* wrong with my mother, but no one would help her. She would have these violent outbursts with us in our home, but then be docile with any doctors who tried to speak with her. It was becoming increasingly difficult on me and my husband.

~

More time goes by. My brother gets married and instantly becomes a father, adopting his wife's two sons from her previous marriage. He makes a career change by joining the U.S. Marine Corps. He bounces around the country for a short time, finally landing at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station in North Carolina. He has been there ever since.

~

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), anosognosia is when a person cannot understand that they have a serious psychiatric illness. It is a medical term for not seeing what affects you. The Treatment Advocacy Center further describes anosognosia as being the most common reason why individuals with schizophrenia do not take their medications.

~

My mother lived with us in our apartment for three years. I finally told her that she would either have to see a doctor to get back on her medication, or she would have to pack her things and go to her father's house about an hour away.

She chose to pack her things. We drove her there one evening. I apologized to my grandfather, but explained that I couldn't handle it anymore. And I left.

Back at our apartment, I packed up the rest of her things. With shaking hands, I put clothes in bags, photographs and papers in plastic totes.

How could it have come to this?

The next day, we packed the rest of her things into the car. I didn't want to see her, so my husband drove them out to her. After that, it would have been nice for things to have gone back to normal again for us, but our marriage was never the same. What is "normal," anyway?

Is it normal to have to evict your own mother from your home and your life?

A few years later, I was divorced and on my own for the first time in my life.

~

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Every year, it's a fourteen hour drive for me to North Carolina to spend holidays with my brother and his family. The travel part of it is always a challenge, but being with family means a lot. The Christmas tree isn't quite the same as it was when we were kids (we had an artificial tree), but the pile of presents is enormous, and it makes my brother's children happy.

~

When my grandfather passed away, the biggest question on everyone's mind was what would happen to my mom. My grandfather had tried to get assistance for her, but she vehemently refused to sign any paperwork, an obvious symptom of her paranoia. With no income of any kind, where was she going to go?

~

My grandfather's will included three people: my uncle, my mother, and myself.

~

My brother and his wife decided the best thing for Mom was to move to North

Carolina to live with them. Uncle Keith and I disagreed, thinking that we might have been able to find aid for her from the State of Connecticut. My brother and his wife convince us that moving to North Carolina will be the best thing for Mom, to spend time with her grandchildren, to be around people, to enjoy the warmer weather. They even agree to put an addition on the house for her to live in. She is soon settled in.

~

A few weeks later, I get a photograph of my mom via Facebook. My brother's wife has helped my mother to color her hair. No more grays. Just chestnut brown locks trimmed neat and blow-dried straight. And that same dimply smile from years ago. Maybe things would work out for my mom after all.

~

More time goes by. I get an email from my brother's wife. She wants to know why my grandfather's house hasn't sold yet. I don't have an answer. That's a question for my uncle.

I hear from my brother's wife much more often than I hear from my brother. My brother has never been the sociable type and has always deferred to his wife. She capitalizes on this.

Ever the drama queen, my brother's wife tells me that life with my mother is difficult. I've been in her shoes and understand how she feels, but I maintain that this is the decision that she and my brother have made. I throw up my hands. It's their problem, now.

I receive a barrage of harassing, insulting, threatening emails from my brother's wife. She even enlists my estranged father to her side of the cause. She has bullied me before, but this time, I don't give in.

My estrangement with my brother's wife begins.

~

My brother and his wife travel to Rhode Island for a family reunion in the summer of 2012. I express to my brother that, since I am unable to make it to the reunion, I'd really like to get together to see him while he's here.

It has been years. We make plans. Then he calls late in the evening the day of the reunion. He is tired, doesn't feel like taking the drive from Providence to Portsmouth, cancels on me.

I feel that he can only hide behind his wife for so long.

I tell him to have a nice life, then hang up. I never hear from him again.

~

When the inheritance checks are finally disbursed, my mother signs her check over to my brother. Shortly thereafter, my brother and his wife drop Mom off at a homeless shelter.

~

November 9, 2012; 10:59pm. My mother has been homeless for the last twenty-four hours. My brother dropped her off at a homeless shelter in New Bern called R.C.S. (Religious Community Services). My brother did not attempt to discuss the decision to

take her there prior to taking action. My uncle has spoken with my mother by phone, and he tells me that she seems fine, in good spirits, actually. I hope the people at R.C.S. will be able to help her.

~

After three months at the homeless shelter, my mother agrees to attend family counseling sessions so that she will be allowed to return to my brother's home. The sessions last eight weeks. From what my mother says, nothing productive comes of them. Then things go back to normal again. Status quo.

~

January of 2014. My mother leaves a message for me on the answering machine. She says it's urgent. When I get back in touch, she tells me my brother's wife is going to drive her to Rhode Island and drop her off at my house.

My blood pressure rises. I tell her in no uncertain terms that it's not an option. My mother is driven from North Carolina to Rhode Island, but instead of bringing my mother to my house, my brother's wife drops her off at a homeless shelter in Providence.

My mother calls to let me know she has arrived.

~

My mother is homeless.

~

It hurts to think about. It hurts to look at those words on paper. It feels like every social worker, every counselor or psychiatrist, every adult family member in my whole

life has forsaken me. And her. Why won't anyone help her? Why won't anyone try?

~

According to Crossroads Rhode Island, "Mental illness exacerbates homelessness." Furthermore, "Among current Crossroads clients 50 to 61 years old, 70% are suffering from physical or mental disabilities."

~

Merritt is a fellow Veterinary Receptionist that I work with. We're not particularly close, but she catches a glimpse of worry on my face one day at the front desk.

"Everything okay on the home front?" she carefully inquires. I spew the whole story.

"No judgment here," she reassures me. "You may want to talk to someone, you know, to sort out your feelings about everything." She then gives me a referral to a therapist. I don't think it's a bad idea.

~

When my mom and I meet at Dunkin Donuts for coffee, she offers to buy but I don't let her. I think things will be awkward, uncomfortable. I think I won't know what to talk about. I think she'll make me angry. But none of that happens. It's a perfectly normal conversation. I'm surprised by how much better I feel afterwards.

If I avoid the subject of my mother's illness, we can have a benign conversation about the weather, about my life, about her life in the shelter. The problem is, a person can only dance around the truth for so long.

My mother establishes a routine and everything is normal for over a year. I see her once a month to give her spending money and a bus pass, but my visits get shorter and shorter each time. I can no longer pretend that her pointless rambling is okay. I can no longer pretend that all of this is normal.

~

My mother calls from Rhode Island Hospital. Winter is colder and more bitter in Rhode Island than it is in North Carolina, and it's hard to keep warm when you're shuffling from the homeless shelter to the bus stop to the bus terminal and back again, day in and day out. As a result, my mother has spent three days in the hospital being treated for pneumonia. Her voice is thin and weak, and I am afraid she's going to die.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you, Ma." I feel like it's my fault, like I should have been better prepared for this situation, like I should be doing more. She tells me it's okay, that she is in good hands, that they have been taking good care of her. She tells me about how her room is really high up in the building, and the cars look small, like toys. She says she has medicine to pick up in the morning, "all paid for," she assures me, and that she's going to be fine. She says I would like the room she is staying in. She asks if I remember that time, over thirty years ago, when she went to the hospital. Of course I do.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you, Ma."

"I'm not," she tells me. The next day, she resumes her routine at the homeless shelter. Everything goes back to normal.

Nostalgic Expectations

“New Year, New You!” During New Year’s Season, this slogan is splashed everywhere. People use New Year’s Day to push the proverbial reset button, to articulate grand resolutions. Despite already being in the midst of a moderately successful fitness program, my brain succumbed to the “New Year, New You” propaganda, and being in this mindset, the idea of the First Day Hike appealed to me.

The online article from the Warwick Beacon gave directions in a way that makes no sense but that seems to be characteristic of Rhode Islanders: everyone was to meet where the old amusement park entrance sign *used to be*. What if you weren’t from Rhode Island? Or worse, what if you were like me and had no idea where the entrance *used to be*? As a child, I never had to find the place on my own. Despite the vague directions, hundreds of people showed up on the morning of January 1, 2015, and our guide from RIDEM introduced us to the new Rocky Point Park.

Over the span of the last century, there has been a pronounced shift in entertainment, a shift from going out for amusement (day trips to the beach, to amusement parks, to movie theaters) to having amusement inside your home (radios, television sets) to having amusement at your fingertips (cellular phones, mobile devices). Change happens, and it is powerful. In a way, Rocky Point has come full-circle. It started in 1847 as a day trip destination, a picnic place by the sea. Today, in 2015, it has once again become a passive-use park where people can go walking and bike-riding.

I decided to poke around online and messaged with friends on Facebook about their memories of Rocky Point. My friend, Bob, said he had loved the batting cages. Batting cages? They were long gone by the time I started going. In David Bettencourt's film, "You Must Be This Tall: The Story of Rocky Point Park," many people recount the endless summer days they spent at the park's in-ground salt water pool. The pool, too, was gone by the time I first visited Rocky Point.

Every person I contacted remembered their own version of Rocky Point, and no one remembered it quite like I did. I realized that it didn't matter what I remembered, good or bad. As much as I loved hearing the history and listening to other people reminisce, the realization that I came to was that Rocky Point Park meant different things to different people during different eras of time. The version of Rocky Point that I had known was just one version of the ever-evolving identity of the park.

The Rocky Point of my youth had been bathed in summer sunshine, the scent of carnival food wafting through the air: clam cakes and dough boys, cotton candy and popcorn. The rides would spin you, sprint you, soak you, and scare you. My brother and I always went to Rocky Point together, whether our supervising adult was my mother, my uncle, or my godmother. It would be revisionist of me to say that Jay and I rode every ride together. Some we did. If there were no lines at the House of Horrors, the man would let us stay in the car and ride through, over and over again. Other times, we each did our own thing, Jay running off to some crazy roller coaster while I cruised above the park on the Skyliner. I remember Rocky Point as a slice of my childhood that Jason and I

shared.

In the Rocky Point that I remember, I could find my way around the park based on where certain rides were. This was next to that, etcetera. The bigger rides, like the House of Horrors or the Corkscrew, would serve as landmarks. The smaller rides would serve as stepping stones in between. There were also sections which made it easy to remember where you were. For example, all of the kiddie rides were in one section. The games of chance were all in another section. I don't ever remember getting lost at Rocky Point when I was a kid. But since then, the landscape has changed.

I thought I'd be walking among memories, picking my way through the debris of the decaying amusement park, seeing flashes of a younger me, a me that no longer exists. I thought it would be like visiting an old friend, the Rocky Point of *my* memory. I expected to navigate the terrain by familiar landmarks and orient myself by the past. But it was all wrong.

Not in a bad way. I mean, it was okay the way I found it. Pleasant, even. Just not what I was expecting.

The landscape, formerly busied by the towering metal skeletons of rides and by an eye-catching palette of illuminated colors, was now empty, a vast expanse of rolling green hills and cloudless blue skies. The field of grass seemed innocuous at first, an ordinary tract of lawn. Upon closer inspection, its thinness became evident, and as I dug the toe of my boot into the ground, it gave way, unmasking a layer of grit and gravel, demolition debris beneath a smiling surface.

I was unnerved by the bits of concrete and glass in the dirt. It was as if I had stumbled across human remains, ancient bones in pilfered sepulchers. The construction-grade turf affronted me like some cruel kind of cover-up. The Rocky Point of my youth had been slain and had become compost to feed the newest iteration of the park.

Only one ride now remains: the Skyliner. Its towers still maintain their green color, though now with splotchy lichens of rust running up and down the length of them. Dead vines remain perpetually tangled between red sheave wheels on either side of the crossarms. The team of towers file in a straight line from the middle of the grass field up the hill to a rocky outcropping in the woods.

The Skyliner had been one of my favorites. Similar to a ski lift, the triple-seater had made a long, lazy loop over the entire park. I loved that I was allowed to ride it by myself. I loved not being jostled or crowded or tossed. I loved not having to share. I floated above the mess and the noise.

The Warwick Beacon article about the First Day Hike had mentioned that the remains of the Skyliner would be there. For me, that was part of the draw. I wanted to look up, to see a different version of myself floating on the lines above. I wanted to catch a glimpse of that child as she relished her first moments of freedom. When I finally got there, everything was gone. I mean, the old Skyliner was there, but everything *else* was gone. There were no other points of reference.

I went on the First Day Hike with nostalgic expectations in mind. I wanted so badly to peer into the past, but I couldn't. I walked bewilderedly across that open field.

There was nothing to grasp onto, nothing to anchor the memories. Like an Alzheimer's patient, the park smiled kindly at me, but it had no recollection of me whatsoever.

I Run

I run.

I run towards things. I run away from things.

I run to try to escape aging and to keep my body young. I am not old. Mid-thirties, but I feel older, more rickety than I should. Running warms me up and smooths me out. I'm running towards that warmth and fluidity of movement; I'm running away from the truth that I am mortal, that someday, I will no longer be able to run. I run to combat this constant sense that my body will beat me, will overtake my ability for movement and leave me sedentary, wasting away.

I'm getting older, and my body reminds me of that fact every morning. My muscles are short and tight from a long night's rest, still sleeping on my bones when my mind has been jolted into consciousness. My ankles crack like dry kindling, my lower back complains at me stiffly. I lumber like Frankenstein towards the bathroom; it will be a few minutes before I trust my legs enough to carry me down the stairs. A few minutes more and the movement in my limbs becomes human again. Now, I can lace up my sneakers and go.

My first real experience with death was when I was six years old. My mother,

brother and I lived on the second floor of an old Victorian tenement house on the west side of Providence, Rhode Island. It was a sunny day. The apartment had large windows throughout, and the sunshine made the whole place bright and cheerful.

The phone rang and my mother took the call. My mother's half of the conversation is a blank in my memory, but what I do remember is that after the call she asked my brother and me to the kitchen table because she wanted to talk to us. We never sat at the table as a family unless we were about to have a meal. That was the first clue that something was wrong.

She told us that Opa had died. Opa was my great-grandfather from Germany. My family had spent all of my summers at his home in rural Connecticut. I was only six, but I had known him well.

Before the news, I hadn't had much experience with death. My paternal grandfather had passed away when I was three years old, but all I remember from that time is that one day Grandpa was there, the next he was not. At age three, I had hardly had a chance to even get to know him. Later in my childhood, I would learn to know and love Grandpa through the stories that his wife, my Noni, would tell, but at the time of his death I don't remember feeling a thing.

With Opa, it was different. We stayed at his place often; our family gathered there for meals all the time. My brother and I would follow him around his expansive garden: we'd pick giant stalks of rhubarb, munch on string beans, and carry the big metal water bucket clear across the yard to fill the concrete bird bath near the chicken coop.

Opa would read to us. Otherwise, my brother and I would squeeze into his easy chair with him so we could all watch television together.

That day, when my mother sat me down at the kitchen table and tried to explain to me that Opa had died, I didn't understand. She said that he was in heaven now, and that we could keep him alive in our memories. It was the same as when Grandpa had died: one minute Opa was there, the next he was not. It was different from when Grandpa died, because, for the first time in my life, I felt an overwhelming sense of loss. This time, it hurt.

So I ran.

I got up from that kitchen table and ran to my room. I collapsed on a giant green bean bag and cried.

When I first started running, it was a lonely struggle from my little cottage on Great Island, over the access bridge and down to the Block Island Ferry Terminal in Galilee, Rhode Island. I was young, but heavy. Being unaccustomed to running, my muscles screamed at me, their protest manifesting in cramps and side stitches. For the duration of that half mile, I panted, never quite finding that even rhythm I would learn later. At the ferry dock, I would sit and catch my breath before heading back. I was a mess, but something inside me was changing. I was becoming a runner.

As the runs increased in frequency, the struggle got easier. Soon, I could make it past the ferry dock, all the way down to Salty Brine Beach, which was always deserted at

that time of day. The fog horn from the Point Judith Lighthouse pierced the early morning mist with lazy regularity. A familiar seaweed smell spiced the air, pungent from the stacks of empty lobster traps at the docks. I'd loop up past Charlie O's and back down to Galilee via the mile-long Escape Route at the edge of the mud flats where families would go clamming on hot summer days. When I was finally able to add a little distance to my runs, I covered sections of the beach at Sand Hill Cove.

I once came across a deer carcass at the waterline. Its middle was all bloodied. Had it been attacked by coyotes? How did it die? I didn't get too close to it because I didn't really want answers. I just wanted to run. So I kept going. I got out of there, quick.

My paternal grandmother, Noni, used to take me and my brother walking at the track at Rhode Island College. We kids were young and didn't know anything about running, so we would race each other, taking off like bullets, only to be worn out entirely before we even made one lap of the track. Noni would laugh. She'd try to explain that we'd have to budget our energy to go longer distances and that we should start out slower. My brother and I would scowl at one another and end up walking with Noni instead of running.

I run because I'm human. Running is one of the things my body was built for. Proprioception is the ability to sense stimuli arising within the body regarding position,

motion, and equilibrium. I think of my body, and I ponder how it fits into the world through action and movement. I see myself on my typical run.

One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four: my feet hit the pavement in steady rhythm. Inhale, exhale, exhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, exhale, exhale: my breathing matches my footfalls, always a four-count, always controlled, always in sync.

There is power in letting go, in embracing the world as it is. For a runner, weather will always be a reckoning force. The defining factor is how the runner deals with it. I can use the weather as an excuse not to run, or I can enjoy it as it comes. I choose the latter.

I want to live. I want to run.

In the winter, my feet seek clean, dry pavement but sometimes find a cold crust to crunch over, avoiding at all costs the slick ice patches that sometimes lurk in sections of the downward camber at the edges of the road. In springtime, these same running routes are heavily sprinkled with gritty sand that tsk, tsk, tsks under the rubber soles of my running shoes.

Rain transforms the runner into a puddle-dodger. I attempt to minimize the drenching effect, maneuvering my way around puddles as much as possible, all the way up until the moment I hit the big one. Inevitable, unavoidable, SPLASH! The liquid sensation encompasses the toebox, seeps through the sock, and causes the toes to register the feeling in surprise. Once one foot is soaked, I give up, letting the rain pour over me,

seeping into my clothes and shoes, becoming one with the small pools that dot the roadside.

I run because it is easy. I don't need anything special, just a pair of sneakers and a blank space in my schedule. I don't have to pay an admission or gym fee. I go at my own pace. I don't have to try to keep up with anyone else. I just walk outside my door and run down the street. I exercise my freedom and my body at the same time.

I have always been enamored of running early in the morning, before the rest of the world wakes up. At the end of a run outside my old attic apartment on Richard Street in Cranston, Rhode Island, I'd look up into the crown of a maple tree, its naked branches studded with stars against a dark sapphire sky, and I'd breathe in the dry winter air as my heart rate settled back into a normal rhythm. I was single, and the only schedule I reported to was my own. In those pre-dawn hours, the world belonged to me, such that my path was spacious and unobstructed.

There was an old man who used to come into the shop where I worked, a Mr. Donnelly. We would always chat while he waited, mostly about sailing, but I mentioned my running. The idea made Mr. Donnelly nervous for me, a single woman pounding the pavement in the early morning darkness. He asked me to start carrying my cell phone, so I did. We talked about pepper spray and where people could buy it.

One day, he showed up with a gift: a small canister of pepper spray in a black plastic case. I was so glad that he had taken all of the worry and discomfort out of that

errand for me. I started carrying that, too, on a lanyard around my neck. The last thing I wanted was to get murdered while out for an early morning jog.

Calise Field was a baseball field adjacent to Riverbend, the apartment complex in which I grew up. The boys team from Bain Junior High School sometimes played there in the Spring. There used to be a good sized hill between the field and the street level, and the field was accessed by giant railroad tie steps built into the side of the hill. In wintertime, it was the best spot for sledding because you could sled down the hill and walk back up using the steps.

Behind Calise Field, between the very edge of outfield and the river, were the Woods. There were several paths through the Woods. Two of them came out to the Riverbend playground. One of them came out to the outfield of the baseball field. The chain link fence was rusty and separated from the top so that kids could get in and out without having to jump the fence. Most of the paths in the Woods led to various spots on the edge of the river and were used by fishermen, but even though our parents forbade us to go into the Woods, we all spent some of our childhood days building forts in there or playing manhunt. So, I knew my way around the Woods pretty well.

My best friend in those days was Andrea Bates, and her dad, Fred, was always active in sports, playing baseball with a men's league in Warwick. Fred used to go to Calise field in the evenings after work and run around the perimeter of the field for a workout. Sometimes, Andrea and I would tag along, and Fred would slow to a walk so

that we could keep up.

I must have been inspired by Fred, because I decided I wanted to start running Calise field on my own. I woke up very early one summer day and went out to the field. I had plans; I was going to be a runner. I had only gotten one lap in when I saw a man walking by at street level up the hill. I didn't think much of it and continued plodding around the field, starting to work up a sweat.

The man, still a good distance away, walked around the fence along an upper edge of the field that was shaded in trees. I still wasn't alarmed, because I knew there were holes in the fences and paths through the trees that served as shortcuts into Riverbend. He could have just been cutting through. But I was alert.

After another half of a lap around the field, I glanced up and saw that the man had pulled down his pants and was baring his rear end, mooning me as I ran. I thought it was pretty juvenile, maybe something my brother would do. The thought also crossed my mind that maybe the man was having stomach trouble and genuinely needed to relieve himself there on the side of the field. My young mind made excuses. I continued to run, but now I was rattled.

The next time I glanced up the hill, the man had turned around and still had his pants down. He had his hand on his flaccid penis and he was waving it up and down. He was a good distance away, but I could clearly see his manhood encircled by a dark patch of pubic hair. I was young, probably not quite a teenager, and I knew this was not something I was supposed to be seeing.

The pit of my stomach was filled with fear. Maybe he was just messing around, but now that he had bared his genitals, I felt threatened. He might try to grab me. He might try to rape me. He might try to murder me. I was all alone out there. I needed a plan.

I kept running the field, trying to keep the same pace I had been running. When I reached the edge of the woods in the outfield, I bolted over the broken fence and into the Woods. I don't remember whether or not I looked back. I just remember assuming that the pervert was probably after me and that I had to get the hell out of there.

I flew through the Woods and out into the playground, but I didn't stop there. I keep running as fast as I possibly could, all the way back to my building. My legs hurt; my chest felt like it was going to explode. At home, I went to my room, still scared. I was shaking, but I felt safe. I felt lucky to be home.

I never told anyone what happened that morning. I never told anyone until now.

I didn't try to go running at Calise Field the next morning. I didn't run there ever again.

Beacon Hill is the highest point on Block Island, Rhode Island. For the briefest of moments one autumn, I lived on a sailboat that was docked at the Boat Basin in New Harbor. Every morning, I'd plod through my loop, which included Beacon Hill Road from west to east. Getting up the pitted, potholed hill meant sometimes stopping to walk, but when the incline evened out I trotted over the road, which was on the verge of being

swallowed by the orange and yellow trees that banked the narrow lane on both sides. My exhalations returned to a steady rhythm as I passed the duck farm with “NO HUNTING” signs posted prominently, and I coasted down the other side of the hill, skirting town, landing in an endorphin haze back at the docks while everyone else continued to snooze below-deck.

Running up a hill is like running in a dream: you feel like your legs are moving in slow motion. You're exerting all of this extra effort but not really going anywhere fast. Despite the strain I feel in my legs, I pretend the hill isn't there. I trick myself into thinking it's flat. I don't give myself time to feed ravenous, complaining thoughts. I repeat, repeat, repeat the same hills because I know the more I do them, the less they bother me. The hills, themselves, diminish over time.

In 2008, I crossed the finish line of my first and only half-marathon thus far. I vaguely remember someone handing me a complimentary medal for finishing. Someone else handed me a bottle of water. I had been running for two hours and forty-five minutes, the longest I had ever run before. My legs were shaking. My lungs were wrung out like a wet rag. I was covered in a thin film of sweat, and my endorphins were kicking so much that I felt like I was floating. Yet, every joint, every muscle, every bone ached with a fury I have never felt, before or since. I lowered myself down to the curb, put my face in my hands, and sobbed.

Because running is such hard work, and because it is often painful, I sometimes

wonder how or why I stick with it. Most of all, it is the sense of accomplishment that I am left with after a run. I may not be the fastest runner out there, but by the time I'm done with a run, I'm glad I did it. Finishing is enough motivation to keep me laced up and headed out the door, time after time.

I run to think, to clear my head. If I need to worry about something, I do it out on a run. Usually, the run will allow me the time and space to think about a problem from many angles, exhausting all possibilities so that I can make peace with whatever it is that is causing me stress. I gaze out at the world around me, and I let my mind wander freely. As if in a dream, my thoughts bounce all over the place. Imagination runs free.

I sometimes run with my imaginary black Labrador Retriever, Gordon Ramsay, whom I named after the famous chef. On these imaginary escapes, I forget what working at Newport Animal Hospital has taught me about cruciate ligament repair surgery and hip dysplasia in large breed dogs: how painful they can be for the animals, how expensive they can be for the owners. Gordon Ramsay and I just run, his coat gleaming in the sunshine. He's the most perfect, most well-trained dog ever, and he trots evenly at my side like a canine athlete, the leash dangling loosely between us, a formality.

Before my husband and I became a couple, we were friends for many years. The first time we ever ran together was during those "friend" years. We were travelling the Great Ocean Road in southern Australia. We went to a place called the Twelve Apostles,

huge limestone rock formations at the coastline in Victoria. There was a bit of a walk from the parking lot to the viewing area, and on the day we visited, the weather was blustery and damp.

I was miserable from the moment I stepped out of the car. I felt chilled to the bone, the kind of chill that's hard to get rid of. Ernie suggested jogging to the viewing area so that we'd warm up, so we did. We ran for about ten minutes, and I did feel much better afterwards.

When we reached the cliffs, the wind was oppressive, but because of the wind, our pictures came out exceptionally well. In some of them, my hair was blowing straight up into the air. In others, the Apostles were engulfed by massive whitewater and chop. Our pictures were better than any of the books or postcards in the gift shop. It was worth it, despite the weather.

At the end of my typical run, I am trotting towards my imaginary finish line, feeling like an Olympic Athlete at the end of a marathon. I am warm; I am limber. My leg muscles are flexing with perfect precision. In my mind, crowds are cheering. Everyone is clapping for me.

My stride opens up and I power forward as fast as I can manage. I feel a looseness in my hips, almost as if my legs are spinning and my torso is staying still, like the Road Runner in the cartoons. I feel like I'm flying. Are my feet even touching the ground? This final sprint lasts only seconds, but the strain on my breathing is immediate,

followed by a quick pinch in my side. I'm always amazed at how much energy I can muster at the end of a run. Once I reach the imaginary finish, I decelerate to a brisk walk. I walk it out to cool down, and by the time I reach home, my breathing is 100% back to normal. Another run logged. Another small success. Another step in the right direction.

Back inside the house, I drink water and stretch. Each stretch focuses on different leg muscles. I ease into the stretches and take my time. I finish with a few balancing exercises and head upstairs for a hot shower. My body thanks me with graceful, fluid movements, reminding me that, thanks to running, I'm not as old as I sometimes feel.

Running is living. Running is staving off the inevitability of death.

Running defines me.

I run so that I can live forever.