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Why So Self-Conscious?  

“You girls sure had quite a game today! The Lady Falcons won again! You did well, Steph, and had a couple nice shots,” stated my dad, attempting to break my sullen silence. “No, I didn’t,” I curtly answered. I stared out the car window, trying to hold back my tears until I could reach the solitude of my room. “What makes you say that?” asked my dad, not realizing his question was releasing a torrent of emotion. “Because I kept missing my shots, and I traveled, and I just had a really bad game,” I half sobbed. “Yes, but you also made some baskets and played some good defense. You weren’t the only person to mess up. More importantly, you helped your team win the game.” My dad tried to reason with me, but to no avail. I remained silent, feeling the shame each time I replayed one of my mess-ups in my mind. His comments about our win and my good plays could not erase the mistakes that embarrassment had burned into my memory, mistakes that every person in the audience had seen. I played with a fear that the crowd would think badly of me, and, despite my dad’s compliments, I could clearly see each imperfection in my game as another step closer to my fear coming true. We finally turned into our driveway, and I escaped to my room to finish my pity party alone. Though I did not realize at the time, I was suffering unnecessarily from a cause/effect relationship—I was causing my self-consciousness and the misery it brought me by focusing on myself and how the crowd viewed me.  

Throughout high school, my thoughts were consumed with worries about how others viewed me, and I was always focused on all my imperfections, wondering if people thought less of me because of them. My fear of what people thought of me drove my ever-failing quest for perfection in my performance in basketball as well as everything else I did. Yet I was not alone in this struggle. Every day, people all over the world experience the same self-consciousness with which I have become intimately acquainted. It does not know the boundaries of culture, race, gender, or environment. It is not phased by age, though teenagers tend to be its most vulnerable subjects. This word, one that describes so many people’s lives, is defined in The American Heritage Dictionary as, “1. Aware of oneself as an individual or of one's own being, actions, or thoughts 2. Socially ill at ease 3. Excessively conscious of one's appearance or manner.” As mentioned in definition one, wanting to look presentable and be accepted are natural desires and good concerns. However, becoming consumed by these desires, as is reflected in definitions two and three, can be destructive. Just like most teenagers, one of my close friends demonstrates the third definition. She has a beautiful voice and loves to sing. She has participated in many concerts and in the worship team in her church, yet every time her friends, including me, ask her to sing for them outside of a performance, she refuses. She explains, “To sing for you is to make myself vulnerable to your rejection. It requires me to give up all control of how you will view me, and I am overcome by the fear that my voice will not be as good as others.” This self-consciousness about one’s appearance and performance is a common bond among teenagers, controlling their thoughts and actions. Yet while the effects of self-consciousness are obvious, its cause is often not so clear.
One can merely look at the word *self-conscious* and see its cause. It has one requirement—focus on *self*. The definition states that to be self-conscious is to be aware of oneself, sometimes excessively so. The worry and fear brought about by this excessive awareness have one thing in common—both are concerned with self. When a self-conscious person walks into a crowded lunchroom, his or her thoughts will be filled with worries such as, *What if I can’t find anyone to sit with? Are those people laughing at me? What if people are watching and judging me right now?* Each fear concerns the self. Even the thoughts concerning others are about how those others view the self-conscious thinker. My pity parties after my basketball games consisted of me feeling sorry for myself. I did care about whether my team won or lost, and I did want us to do well. But even when we won, I would cry the entire car ride home because I had not fulfilled my overwhelming desire to play well for the crowd. I rarely acknowledged the accomplishments I made, for I was too busy beating myself up for my embarrassing moments, knowing many people had seen each one. The game was not about winning or having fun; it was about how I played. The same pattern of thought can be seen in my friend who hides her voice. She refuses to sing when she does not have to because she will be vulnerable, she might be rejected, and she may not be as good as others. The focus of her fears and worries is herself.

Self-consciousness is a complicated emotion, so I am not trying to reduce its origins to one cause. People’s personalities and childhood experiences both play parts in their awareness of themselves. Each person has an own individual story and struggle. But I do know from my own experience as well as others’ that one cannot be self-conscious without focusing on oneself. Some people struggle with self-consciousness about their performance, whether it in sports, other activities, academics, or various forms of service. Other people worry about their appearance, constantly trying to reach perfection in the way they look. Yet while the reasons for self-consciousness and its intensity varies from person to person, it can always be traced back to thoughts concerning the self.

In my case, I did not realize my self-consciousness was the result of my self-centeredness. For a long time I was so consumed with fear of people rejecting my performance as a basketball player that I was blinded to the fact I was playing for myself and not for my team. Eventually my parents helped me realize my own thought process was making me miserable. To change the effect of my self-consciousness, I needed to change its cause. I did this by doing a task that is simple to understand and immensely hard to put into practice—I took my focus off myself. I fought this innate desire to focus on myself by giving each game to God, telling Him I was playing for His glory instead of my own. Instead of stepping out on the court as Stephanie Gogel, I began to play as a Lady Falcon. When I played well it was for the team and for God, and when I did not do so well I shook it off and simply continued trying to do my best. I was finally beginning to understand and live Colossians 3:23, in which Paul writes, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” This verse holds the key to breaking the powerful chains of self-consciousness, for me and for everyone, as people who are not focused on themselves cannot be self-conscious.

While I believe this is a simple truth, I do not mean to imply that stopping these feelings is equally as simple. On the contrary, breaking the bonds of self-consciousness is an arduous process that requires effort each and every day. I have known the cause of my self-consciousness for years now, yet I still struggle each day, some more than others. Even though I now understand this cause effect relationship that has characterized my life for so long, I have not eliminated it, nor will I. Rather, my goal is to control the feelings that have controlled me for too
long. Awareness of oneself and others’ perceptions of oneself are innate characteristics of all humans. To have complete freedom from fear of what others think is barely achievable if not entirely impossible, yet taking one's focus off of oneself and putting it on serving God and others is not only an achievable goal, but a desirable one as well. Though my friend fears singing for others, she still sings. Though she will not do it impromptu, she does sing at church and at school. She is even more vulnerable in front of an entire audience, yet she can still sing because her focus is blessing the audience rather than gaining their acceptance.

Self-consciousness can affect anyone. It can only be overcome by recognizing it not as the cause of fear, but rather the effect of focus on self. Changing the focus will change the result, transforming a sad and fearful person into a compassionate and joyful servant of others.

Works Cited

The Bible. New International Version.
“Ghazi!” he said. “Say it with me: Gh-a-zi! Make the sound in the back of your throat. Hgg!” The blond French girl looked at him, bewildered. “Hazi?” she said. “No,” he replied. “Gazi?” she asked. “Hgg, hgg. The sound is in the back of your throat. Gh-a-zi.” “Gahazi?” she guessed desperately. “Call me Gordon,” he mumbled resignedly, as a look of relief washed over the girl’s face and she stole an exasperated glance at the rest of the group sitting in a circle on the quad. That is the story of how I first met my friend Gordon.

As a freshman I came to Houghton College straight from four years of living in Estonia, clearly classifying me as a “TCK,” or “Third Culture Kid.” One of the big attractions of Houghton has a week-long transition program before the other freshmen arrive to help prepare and welcome incoming TCKs and international students. It was during this transition program that I met Gordon, a TCK from Syria.

I was instantly struck with envy upon meeting Gordon for four distinct reasons. First of all he wore glasses that just seemed to say “the person who wears me is a genius,” and his bearing and mode of speech further indicated a great deal of intelligence. Secondly, I greatly envied his hair. Gordon had long hair pulled back in a ponytail reaching slightly below his shoulders. Gordon’s long hair gave him the image of a Cherokee warrior, which is fitting given his Cherokee heritage. Having long hair had always been an ambition of mine, yet I knew that I could never pull it off and look any good. The third reason for my envy was his nametag. While I had scrawled “Chris” in my sloppy handwriting, his nametag said something in beautiful, flowing Arabic, lending him an exotic and interesting air. Next to him I felt extraordinarily plain.

The final reason for my envy was quite simple. Gordon’s parents had come with him to bring him to college, while I had come from Estonia to Houghton alone.

During a stereotypical get-to-know-names icebreaker game on the quad Gordon told us that his nametag said “Ghazi” and that was his preferred name, being the name he was used to in Syria. The only problem was that no one could pronounce “Ghazi,” no matter how hard he tried to teach us. We tried making sounds in the back of our throats, yet even with a group so diverse that Africa, Europe, and South America were represented numerous times no one could get his name right. Consequently he conceded to be called Gordon, his American name.

Afterwards the group went to play some other game, and as we walked I heard a few of the other students mocking Gordon. “It’s Ghazi. Hag, guh, grahh! It’s in the back of the throat! Hahaha.” It was then that I decided that not only did I want to be Gordon’s friend, but I also wanted to learn how to pronounce his Arabic name.

A few days later the group had a bonfire together and I began to see that even in a group this small it was starting to become apparent who was “cool” and who was an “outcast.” In a way I was happy that Gordon was also an outcast because it would make befriending him much easier. So, while all the “cool kids” played guitar and sang praise and worship songs, Gordon pulled out his I-phone and the few outcasts huddled around it to watch funny YouTube videos and tell jokes. I was glad that by the end of the night I could consider Gordon my friend.
As time went on I discovered that I had more in common with Gordon than I had first thought. One of these things was our taste in humor, particularly our common enjoyment of British comedy. During a shopping trip to Walmart, a rather exciting adventure for those living in the middle of nowhere (Houghton), Gordon was the only person who shared my excitement when I found a special edition DVD of two of Rowan Atkinson’s movies. I was glad to be able to find someone else in America who appreciated Rowan Atkinson’s comic genius. As we laughed together I knew that I had gained a good friend.

Then one day I went to visit Gordon in his room. Gordon lived two floors above me on the international floor. I had been offered a place on the international floor but had refused due to the fact that as a prospective I had seen a Soviet flag through the window of what I had believed to be the international floor lounge. Coming from Estonia I hated Communists, and the only people I hated more than Communists were Russians. I had felt as upset by the Soviet flag as many Jews are by the sight of a Swastika. In hindsight I found the irony of this beautiful, because as I entered Gordon’s room I noticed a rather large poster of Che Guevara, the South American Communist revolutionary. Being an Anarchist myself I respected Che for being a revolutionary, but not as a Communist. As Gordon saw me admiring his tribute to Guevara he informed me that he was a Communist, and I turned to him in shock and anger.

A Communist? I thought. Well, I guess this is the end of our friendship! I don’t care how cool or fun you are, I HATE COMMUNISTS! Though I was slightly saddened at the idea that I would lose a friend I was also angered at the knowledge that here at Houghton there was a true, red-blooded Communist. I knew I had to confront him and tell him I hated Communists, explaining what the Soviets had done to my country, Estonia, the country I love, in the name of Communism. I had to tell him that Communism was evil. This is the end of an extremely short and shallow friendship, I reasoned.

I confronted Gordon and told him all the crimes of Communism—how evil it was, how Communism had ravaged my country and killed twenty-five percent of its population during the fifty years of its illegal occupation, and how I hated Communism and wished hell’s fire upon all Communists. In response, he calmly and intelligently explained himself. He explained that I hated Soviets, not Communists, because the crimes in my country were committed by the Soviets, who were not true Communists. Then he went on to enlighten me about the Communism he actually believed in. He did not believe in a Communism with a corrupt government; he believed in an ideal Communism where all would be shared equally without the need of government control. He did not believe that the Communism of the Soviets was right and true Communism, and that is why the Soviet Union fell. Gordon even gave examples of how Communism was supported in scripture by the actions of the early church. It was just as I had first thought: Gordon was extremely intelligent. After an hour of discussion ranging from my hostile confrontation of his Communism to a calm and friendly exchange of understanding and ideas, I had a revelation: This is the beginning of a very long and good friendship.

That day Gordon didn’t convince me that Communism is right or will ever work, but he did convince me that he was just the kind of friend I wanted. After an hour of debate I knew that I would never agree with Gordon about everything, or maybe even anything, but that we would always talk intelligently and respectfully and with the aim of understanding each other. This was a great relief for me, having just moved to America from Europe, due to the fact that in Europe the understood definition of “argument” is quite different from that of the way it is understood in America. In Europe an argument is an exchange of ideas between two people with differing opinions. If one party convinces the other, that’s great, but it’s not the point. The point
of argument is a mutual increase in knowledge and a better understanding of each other, even if they can’t agree. In America I have come to find that the common definition of “argument” is a fight in which two people who consider themselves opponents due to their opposing ideas try to tear down each other’s ideas and convince their opponent that they are wrong and must concede. As I prefer the European understanding of argument I was overjoyed to meet someone who was willing to argue with me in an intelligent way.

Over time I have become quite good friends with Gordon and would count him among my best friends. We’ve had many adventures and misadventures together, ranging from the time when Gordon was reported to the Office of Safety and Security for having accidentally scared some rather skittish American girls and I had to come forward as a witness and a friend to defend him in this misunderstanding, an incident that he brushed off with his now infamous statement “It’s not easy being red...” to the infamous “Red Night” during which a group of friends marched around wearing red with Gordon and I while carrying a red flag. Though Gordon and I still argue sometimes we have found some common ground. Due to my belief that absolute power corrupts absolutely I have become an Anarchist because I can’t trust any government to not be corrupt. Though Gordon is an ardent Communist, he and I have found a common ground in an obscure political concept known as Anarchist Communism, which has aspects both Gordon and I agree on. Thus, though I may still be Black and he may still be Red we are still great friends.

Since Gordon is a double major in writing and psychology and I am a writing major with a psychology minor, Gordon and I will be taking many classes together, and given our mutual interest in writing we have started a blog together with some other writers at Houghton. Also, Gordon and I will be rooming together next semester due to the fact that we’re both a little too eccentric for our current roommates. We’ve agreed that we will have an equal amount of Communist propaganda and Estonian nationalism and my Estonian flag will hang next to his Communist one.

Sometimes I think back on our crazy friendship that brought us together. I still can’t pronounce “Ghazi,” though not for lack of trying. We still enjoy British humor together and watch Black Adder, some of Rowan Atkinson’s older and finer work. And Gordon and I still enjoy discussing Communism and Anarchy, though we both recognize that neither one could probably ever work. When I look back over our friendship I think of what would have happened had I not listened to him when he told me about his views on Communism, or what would have happened had he not had the patience to debate with me. I would be missing out on a great friendship, I would have a much less intellectually challenged life, and I wouldn’t have a roommate either. I’m glad I listened to his arguments, and I’m glad I didn’t reject him right away.

Hopefully now the next time I meet an eccentric outcast with crazy political views, a Fascist from Timbuktu perhaps, I’ll be more willing to listen and realize how great eccentric friends can be.
If Only

If only. Those must be the two saddest words in the world.

—Mercedes Lackey ("Regret Quotes")

I was standing on the stage with the lights heating up my mustard-colored gown. Blinded by the flash of cameras and the spotlight, I looked down at my hands. I was so surprised at this scholarship that I knew had a dumbfounded look on my face. I had known there was a possibility of me receiving it but also thought that most wishes are just dreams. *I know my parents are proud of me as I stand here in my cap and gown, but I know someone else would be too,* I sighed. *If only Grandma were here...*

My parents took my sister and me to the hospital to say our final goodbyes to my grandmother two days before my sister’s twenty-first birthday and four days before my graduation. Today I wonder why I spent my high school years trying to gain my grandmother’s approval when she would never be able to see me walk the stage. I had used my energy to try to direct her attention to my good grades and had resisted the many years of knowledge and culture she wanted to share with me. I now regretted the time I spent focusing on me rather than her.

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My dad’s soft, tearful voice as he prayed the last prayer my grandmother would hear flowed in a delicate way across the small hospital room. His large, damp hand clamped itself over mine. Both our hands were stained with salty tears. My father prayed for Grandma’s salvation, and, if possible, her healing. There we were, our hands clasped tightly together, my dad and sister’s hands lying ever so gently on my grandma’s shoulder, as if it were made of glass. I don’t know if she ever knew that we were there that day, or heard my last whispered words to her. I can only hope.

Even as my family and I stood vigil around my grandmother, thoughts of this caring woman came into my head. I am a second generation Asian-American. My father was born and raised in Rawlins, Wyoming. My grandfather started a restaurant called “Wing’s Café” and then gained a hotel franchise. This is where my grandmother worked for most of her adult life. No sooner would she see the kids off to school then head straight to the restaurant. Returning home in time to get my father and his five siblings off the bus, she would spend the rest of the night tending to the affairs of the family. She took care of everyone in this small town with a population of eight thousand, including a small family of orphaned baby lambs. No creature was overlooked by her; she considered each one worthy of love.

While this woman had such a compassionate heart, at times she was stubborn and difficult to be around. Even though she was in the United States longer than my parents have been alive she “lost” her English soon after I was born. My mother believes she refused to speak English after this because of her ignorance of the language. The English words I could get out of her were few but I have held them close to me ever since. When we said our goodbyes to each other after family visits or a holiday dinner she would say, “You good girl, you smart” and end with, “Me love you.”

Besides her telling me I was “good” and “smart,” she also had moments when she would tell me I should be more like my older sister in terms of grades and beauty. In addition to trying to persuade me that higher grades were extremely important, she also did her best to get me to be...
more of a carnivore, telling me to “eat, eat, eat” because, she said, my complexion would look better as a result. It seemed as if my grandmother wanted me to be perfect. She set the bar of expectation so high it was hard to even come close. When I was a sophomore I worked all the harder to get into the National Honor Society to please my grandmother. In this respect, I was just as stubborn as she was. My grandmother was a positive influence in the way that she caused me to try my best, but I also lost valuable time with her focusing on other things—things that would please her—rather than on our relationship.

So many memories flashed through my mind as my family slowly made their way out of my grandmother’s hospital room with streams of tears and red, puffy eyes. The rest of my family kissed her on her forehead and said their final “I love you”s. Meanwhile, I somehow found the courage to sit beside my grandma on her bed. I peered over her failing body and looked at her aged face. I remember wondering if I would look like her when I got old. Would I have the soft veiny hands that she had? Would my lips slowly lose their color? Would I be living my final days in a cold hospital room? I placed my youthful hand over hers and leaned over her inclined body. After kissing her on both cheeks just like she did when saying goodbye I whispered, “You good girl, Grandma; me love you.”

Grandma died two days after we said our goodbyes. My father believes that she waited another two days so my sister would have a good birthday. In any case, my graduation day came quickly. And it was better than I thought, especially as I was called back on stage for a surprise teaching scholarship that would have made my grandma proud.

Soon after my graduation ceremony my family left for Wyoming to bury my grandmother next to her husband. When we arrived we were able to see the house where my dad grew up. Being at my father’s childhood home gave me a new perspective of the woman with a long history. I saw how much she was a pack rat just like my father and me. Looking around the kitchen, I found a test that my father took when he was in fourth grade tacked up on the fridge. To me that test and even more so the fact that it was still tacked on the fridge all these years later symbolized how proud my grandmother was of my dad. I realized that she may have corrected me and expected a lot, but it was only because she wanted the best for me.

Grandma herself had a good life because of all the things she valued. Unfortunately, during the bulk of it, Christ wasn’t part of it. My grandmother took care of everything and everyone, but until the end of her life she always avoided the subject of religion. Thankfully, during weeks that my grandma spent in the hospital, our pastor visited with her and spoke the Word of God to her. Grandma and Reverend Sanford talked about a life worth living for Jesus and not for oneself. When my grandma passed away Reverend Sanford came to our family and told us that Grandma had accepted the Lord just before she died.

When he told our family this, it struck me that I learned an important lesson. I realized that, while it is important to do my best, I should not to try and live up to anyone’s expectations but instead live to please Christ. What stood out to me even more, though, was that I’m sure my grandmother learned a lesson of her own too, namely that what matters most is not what we own or achieve but the free gift of forgiveness we have because of Christ’s love.

Even as I stood on stage at graduation I had mixed feelings. If only Grandma had lived longer, I thought, she would have been able to form a great friendship with God instead of waiting to the last possible moment to ask for forgiveness and experience that love. If only I knew that grades were not everything to my grandma, I could have done things that I really enjoyed for my own pleasure. If only we had more time, I could have had a better relationship with you and learned about my Chinese heritage.
I will never get a “You good girl” when I walk off this stage from you, Grandma. Not even the slightest smile will cross your face in a show of pride. Yet if you were here, I would tell you how proud I am of you for raising a great son to be the father he is now, for the work you did for others and not yourself, and for making the best decision of your life: to be part of God’s family. If only you were here, I would tell you.

Work Cited

There is a flash of recognition in her face today as I walk into her room to visit. I’m sure no name came to her mind, no word of relation that links her as my grandmother, no tender memory of our shared past. But she still knows that I am something familiar, just like the dusty book of crossword puzzles on her nightstand used to be. She would munch through the clues in between spoonfuls of Cornflakes for breakfast. She’d even play dumb with the easy ones so that I had to come to the rescue, nourishing my childish ego. Cornflakes, crunch, clue, and repeat. This was the rhythm of her morning.

I pick up the faded crossword book that has been resting as an empty foundation for picture frames. My aunt must have brought it a while ago, hoping my grandmother would construct a tower for herself with the neat, white boxes and climb her way back to sensibility. To being our Meema. Besides my grandpa, my aunt is the one who sees Meema the most, and yet she still hasn’t accepted her mother’s illness. Call it hope, call it denial, it doesn’t matter. Her love for Meema is tangible and trembling—it travels down a generation and stirs me from cynicism.

The first crossword puzzle remains blank, as I expected. Now that I’ve made the mistake of looking at a clue, I can’t close the book until I’ve answered at least one—something I’ve inherited from Meema. 13 Across: A high point, esp. in literature; culmination. Using my fingers to count out the number of letters, I’m confident with an answer: Climax. It fits, but the clue seems to be insufficient. Yes, it’s a high point, the moment when the action peaks, when everything that happened before it finally seems worthwhile. But it’s what happens after the climax that’s important; it’s what the climax incites that creates meaning. After it comes, everything winds down, spirals to the end like a maple leaf seed propelling wildly to the ground. Until it crashes, ceases.

It’s easy to identify the climax in Meema’s life, even easier than in some novels I’ve read. Seven years ago, her fiftieth wedding anniversary, surrounded by her entire family—she peaked right before our eyes, but no one had any idea.

Meema was the axis of our family, of any social network she belonged to. So at an event like this, as long as she was the sturdy center, various spheres of people that had never previously met could revolve around her in perfect harmony, interweaving with each other but never colliding.

She could attract cousins from across the country, sisters from the ends of the earth, and friends from the forgotten pages of phonebooks. Even as a twelve year old, I could mingle with almost anyone there because I knew we had one thing in common: we knew Barbara Strollo, though her grandkids called her Meema. And today, she’s been married to Patsy for fifty years, so grab another cannoli and celebrate!

It was an anniversary, a celebration of two people, but everyone gravitated toward Meema. Her bright cheeks, calm but abundant laughter, ever-sparkling eyes. She was magnetic. Papa knew this about his wife, and he gladly allowed her to be the dazzling pillar of the party.

But for one moment, they were suspended together. Hands linked, my Meema and Papa strolled onto the dance floor, stopping in the center while we circled around them. Her short arms stretched to rest on his shoulders once again. It mattered little whether the music started. With the two of them standing in unity, connected, the moment lacked nothing, and they
captivated the entire room. When the melody finally broke in, they stood still. Fifty years of unmatchable love now condensed into a three minute song. Gripping onto her companion that night, slowly, slightly, Meema began to sway. Like the top tier of a mobile barely flicked into motion, she turned gently, almost imperceptibly, inciting the rest of the contraption to twist in response. The whole room watched, and still we saw nothing, even as we, too, began to wobble.

She speaks, looking at my red shirt. I’ve heard somewhere that people like Meema respond to the color red (Dunne). Just like infants do. I always make a point to wear or bring something bright for her, just to give her some kind of stimulation that might draw her to speak. I’ll be my grandmother’s matador, luring her into action with a wave of my crimson cape.

“You like my shirt? Yeah, I thought you might. It’s new,” I ramble.

Again, she utters a string of words, half-words, and non-words. Somewhere in her mind was an idea, something that ignited her speech. But from thought to voice, everything derailed. I’ve become exceptionally skilled at guessing games, trying to fill in the dozens of gaps—canyons, really—that she doesn’t even know she’s skipped over. Lately though, like this time, she’s been losing me.

So I smile and say nothing. Words, spoken or written, have entirely lost their meaning, and she probably doesn’t even remember that she’s just said something. Luckily, I’ve never found silence intimidating or uncomfortable, which equips me well for these visits. I reach out across the stillness between us and cradle her hand in mine, trusting with a reckless hope that, surely, she can still feel love. Her fingers twitch slightly under my hand, and she chuckles faintly, irrationally. Love and laughter are close cousins, so I’m satisfied by this response.

She’s looking away from me toward the window in her room, continually unaware that I am here with her. On her face dance several distorted rainbows, cast upon her paleness by painted dream catchers hanging on her window. One is an elephant, which ironically was her favorite animal. The other is a colorful scene—a carnival, maybe, with balloons and a carousel. She stares vacantly in this one’s direction, blurring me from her consciousness.

I can do nothing more but rub the back of her hand with my thumb, waiting for her to notice me again. Her skin is powdery, thin, and pliable. It feels like dough. Cookie dough, or maybe homemade pasta.

The holidays always showcased Meema as the expert chef that she was, especially Christmas. With the help of us grandkids, she’d start preparing the food right after Thanksgiving so she’d have enough time to finish, though mostly because she simply loved to cook for her family. With her six kids and their families coming, the old house was going to be full. And hungry.

Even before we really understood how valuable constancy could be, the menu was the same every year. For dinner: individually made ravioli and garlicky braciole enhanced only by a subtly spice tomato sauce, and then a tangy pepper salad on the side. Dessert promptly followed, which included a myriad of cookies, from crumbly shortbread to dense raisin butter tarts. But despite her flawless preparation of any food she created, Meema’s pride, and everyone’s weakness, was her pies. Pumpkin, apple, berry cheesecake, each with her sweet, flaky crust that could not be replicated—all three appeared on the table at once, coupled with a giant bowl of freshly whipped cream. As a child, this feast heralded the coming of a new year for me. Second only to the birth of Christ, this was the meaning of Christmas.

Gradually, cooking became difficult, even dangerous for her. The grandkids that once learned from the master reluctantly took over. The ravioli was thicker, the braciole tougher, and the pies weren’t even attempted. Food prepared in sorrow will never compare to the flavor of
joyful cooking, regardless of skill. But we ate and served it all to her as if it were just another celebration.

If we ever tried to convince ourselves in the beginning that she wasn’t sick, all we had to do was eat food that she prepared. My mom and I would go to Meema and Papa’s house when she still lived there, and I would always leave with an aching stomach and heart. Upon our arrival, she’d still go to the kitchen like she used to and begin pulling out any kind of food she could offer. She’d circle around and around, checking and rechecking cabinets and the fridge until my mom compelled her to sit down.

Some things would be edible, but other concoctions made me sad to look at. I pictured her in the kitchen, wanting desperately to create something for her family when they visited. But she just could not do it. And so when she would offer and reoffer me the “food” she had made, I had to say that I didn’t want any. I hated doing this, because she looked so hurt and dejected. Never before had I been forced to do something that I regretted so much, that made me feel physically sick from remorse. At this stage of the disease, was she aware of her failure?

I look at her and smile away the creeping tears. She is not aware now. Thank God, she does not know. Merciful oblivion, the best and worst part of this disease. But the woman sitting next to me has lost her identity. The past and its memories have been cancelled. She doesn’t know that she once loved being alive, that she was as passionate about football as a grown man, or that she used to read and write beautiful poetry.

Still blanketing her hand with mine, words from a favorite Pablo Neruda poem pester me:

Water water water,
the past goes on falling
although it keeps a grip
on thorns
and on roots.

It went, it went, and now
memories mean nothing.

Now the heavy eyelid
shut out the light of the eye
and what was once alive
is no longer living;
what we are, we are not.

And with words, although the letters
still have transparency and sound
they change, and the mouth changes;
the same mouth is now another mouth;
they change, lips, skin, circulation;
another soul took on our skeleton;
what once was in us now is not.

No, she isn’t aware anymore that she is barely Meema, that her essence is almost snuffed out. But I am. We all are, regardless of our acceptance of it. I stare into her canvassed face and wonder when exactly this other soul completely captured my grandmother’s skeleton.

The first day that my fear induced an acknowledgement of another soul invading Meema’s body was about five years ago. She was recovering from some mild chest pain, but for
the first time I realized that this was of secondary importance. Yes, she had a sudden health scare, but on this day I saw her Alzheimer’s. I finally shared in the understanding of how severe the situation was with all of my adult relatives. And how, bluntly and not dramatized, there was simply no hope for improvement.

Hospitals have a way of stripping any last hopeful illusion. Stark, sterile, blank. My mom was visibly apprehensive on the way to the hospital. Her fingers, which usually flick the buttons of the radio without a care, curled tensely around the steering wheel. We sat in silence. When she did speak, it was to warn my sister and me.

“Meema might seem different, guys. Just do your best.”

She knew something, but what? How could Meema be so different since the last time I saw her?

When she shuffled out of her room to greet us, I saw no difference. And when she suggested that we rescue her to go and get dinner, I was convinced that my mom had been worried for no reason. This was my Meema, the way she always had been.

But then she brought up dinner again. When we insisted that she could not leave, she seemed so confused, almost offended. How irrational, I thought, and so… unlike her.

Then she asked to leave again and became quietly angry when my mom said that we couldn’t. Alright, she’s changed, I conceded. Mom was right. The realization of my mom’s somber wisdom chilled me. I suddenly had no idea what to say, what to think. I was as confused as Meema seemed to be, taking my cues from my mother, to whom I looked before I spoke or moved anywhere. I stuttered, flushed easily, kept my eyes anchored to the floor. She was not the same, and I finally knew that she would never be the same again. For the first time, I became sensitive to my own unsteadiness and to my place on this twisting family mobile. Strung beneath my mother, we teetered in sync for this moment.

Still I wondered: did she understand what was happening to her? Did she feel her life spinning away from her grasp, twirling into nothingness?

It’s this grey area that saddens me the most. That period when her illness was creeping in and she was still healthy enough to know it, to feel it consuming her slowly, knowing she was helpless. I’ve wondered how long she knew before anyone else realized. How desperately she hoped to conceal it, ignore it, wishing it would then go away.

I remember her vaguely talking about it, like it was something absurd. She had been to a doctor, who had the audacity to do her job and test Meema for some form of dementia. Dr. Naik: Internal Medicine, probably the first and last known enemy Meema had.

She told everyone for weeks about this test, or as she saw it, this insult to her intelligence. One question in particular seemed to irk her. Perhaps it was just the only one she could remember. She was asked to spell words backwards, since word recollection is one of the first things to fail (Kennard). Simple words, but when she could not do it, she got frustrated, even hostile.

“I’d like to see that doctor answer the questions she asked me. That isn’t easy to do, you know. And she just sat there with this look on her face, nagging me to keep going. I wanted to smack her,” Meema grumbled.

I didn’t know it then, but beneath this unusual resentment was unspeakable anguish and fear. She understood what was happening. She knew what this test was for, she knew that she had failed, she knew what this meant. And she was terrified.

What I still don’t know, though, is how this understanding of total powerlessness, of feeling her life slowly tumble out of reach, did not kill her long ago.
Absent but certainly still alive, she sits here next to me. My visits are much more stagnant lately. She used to be restless, so we’d walk around the nursing home, circling the building until it was time for me to leave. Her mobility is becoming much more restricted and burdensome. This regression should mark her at the end of Stage 6, with only one more to go (Wayne). I like to keep it all in perspective and to know what to expect. But I have to look past the science, the case studies, the exceptions, the hollow and poorly-timed “breakthroughs,” and just see Meema.

Right now, she’s drifting to sleep beside me. Her hand no longer rests beneath the warmth of my own. She moved it away a while ago without reason, without knowing.

*Just see Meema.* It’s her memory that’s gone, not mine, so why is this so difficult for me? She seems like a phantom in this bleak room, or a mirage. A hazy, spinning mirage, revolving in silent chaos. I want to touch her, stop her, be hugged by her, but her image is dizzying to look at, undefined.

Instead, I look around the room for context clues, for something that will tether her to me. Maybe then I could find a means to make her understand how much I love her. But all I see is coldness and unfamiliarity, neither of which Meema ever embodied. She does not belong here in this nursing home. This warm and caring person was like a home in herself. She would take anyone into her comforting arms and demonstrate true hospitality and friendship. You’d have thought that her small house had an extra wing not visible from the street. When the blizzard of ’77 knocked out the heat of her elderly neighbor, Meema did not hesitate to provide him shelter for several days. When my mom’s friend from school faced difficult family problems, Meema courageously offered for her to live with them as long as she needed. And every Christmas, when she just happened to make extra cookies, she’d deliver tins to each of her neighbors, full of her unbeatable delicacies. She never did seem to get the math right for the yield amounts on those recipes.

The fortress of our family, now confined to the emptiness of this shell of a building. I remember the day she moved here: early June of my senior year in high school. It was a salty day. The only time I cried during all of this was when my mom sat beside me on the couch, trying to be strong, trying not to cry. At that moment, I saw her as Meema’s daughter, broken and lost, yearning for her mother’s guidance that she could never receive again. She was on her own. Torn between playing the role of a desperate child and my unshakable mother, she shut down in front of me. I looked at her, knowing she was crumbling inside, and so I fell apart. I am her daughter just as she is Meema’s. I borrowed her grief then, terrified by the sorrow of losing a mother in this way. We collapsed together into a weeping embrace, and I absorbed the trembles from my mom, which had descended to her from Meema’s instability, the head of our unstoppable mobile.

Eventually, our tears merge with those of the rest of my family when the time comes to take Meema from her home and move her into the nursing home. Although we hated doing this, we knew that it really was best for her and for Papa, who wasn’t able to take care of his wife anymore. You know a situation is dismal when the best you have to offer someone is one of the worst things imaginable.

Today, the 17th of May, she’s been here almost a year. But I cannot think of that now. *Just see Meema.* Today, Meema turns eighty. Everyone else should be here by now, waiting in the family lounge for her. I’ll join them soon, once Papa comes to take over for me so he can walk her down there.
I hear him walk in the door behind me, just as he has done every day since Meema no longer lived with him. She stares straight ahead at the TV when he comes over, bends slightly, and kisses her forehead. I’m reminded that real love does exist every time I see Papa with his wife. Their bond is my greatest source of joy through all of this, as well as my deepest sorrow. The gravity of my grandfather’s loss is unknowable by us, inexpressible by him.

“Happy Birthday, Ma.”

She looks directly at him and the rotating recognition surfaces in her face again, along with some other sensation. Something like joy. I am not needed anymore, so I get up and join the rest of my family in the lounge.

Soon, Papa makes his way into the room, guiding Meema beside him. She sees us all and stops, startled by the overwhelming number of people who are both strangers and yet vaguely familiar. We surround her, gawking with painted smiles, waiting for her to perform a trick. But she stands there, fenced-in by people who reel in her deleted memory as colorful figments, nothing more. I can’t help but feel uncomfortable knowing this party is more for us than for her.

Leading Meema to a table, Papa sits her down. We set the unnaturally colored cake in front of her. The bright colors of the frosting make her look up in wonder to see if any of us would mirror her amusement. We do our best to humor her and act like it is the most beautiful red we’ve ever seen. I’m sure a smile would have been sufficient.

My cousin moves next to Meema. Out of all of us, I’m guessing that she takes the most comfort in this ceremony, believing that we’re here completely for my grandmother. She rests her hand on Meema’s shoulder and says in a loud, slow voice:

“It’s for you, Meema…it says ‘Happy 80th Birthday. We love you!’” Meema used to read everything she saw—everything, whether or not she actually understood what she was reading. Now, the blue “We love you” icing before her sits unconsumed as its bold color begins to bleed into the vacant white background.

The party progresses; the cake is cut. I don’t really want a piece, neither does anyone else, I think, but we all take the heaping slice that is handed to us. With this act over, we sit around the table, circling Meema. Side conversations commence, animated stories are shared, while Meema’s gaze bounces as if to keep up with the entertainment of life revolving around her. She can no longer relate to any of it. Her dissolved memory exiles her from our performance, like a child sent to the corner. And so she sits, trapped on the carousel of memories that whirl around her in an unrecognizable blur. Remnants of a life once so clear are now so splintered, so out of focus, so unobtainable.

The allotted time for which we reserved the family lounge is up. So, we gather our props, unite in a chorus of “I love yous,” and leave the birthday girl spinning on the merry-go-round, circling until the momentum eventually carries her no longer.

Looking back as I leave, I want to steal a glimpse of Meema, just Meema. But so much of how I see her depends on her relationships with those nearer to her than I am. We’re all connected by her, moved by her, united by her, though to varying degrees. Despite any tension, sorrow, and discomfort, I see that she managed to bring us all together for this day. She is still the top tier of my family mobile. Her spiraling force precipitates downward, jerking and twisting the lower levels in a cacophony of movement. Papa, though directly beneath Meema at the top, appears fixed to his best friend. He secures her hand in his, giving some definition to her fuzzy outline. I smile and keep walking, certain that he will hold her until the dizziness wears off. At that moment, she’ll finally be steady, and the rest of us must begin to settle.
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What happens when someone’s mind begins fraying around the edges and just keeps unraveling? When the person who was always a blessing to others becomes only a burden, only a consumer, and no longer a giver? My grandmother was once a vibrant, attractive, and compassionate woman. Alzheimer’s disease has ripped that all to shreds. At first I thought the damage would mostly affect her, but as is typically experienced with Alzheimer’s, “although the patient has the disease, the family members suffer the most” (“Alzheimer’s Disease: The Brain Killer”). My mother and I have become tangled up, hopelessly it seems at times, in the loose threads scattered about and trailing from her ever disintegrating life.

My mother sends me to find my grandmother’s glasses before we take her home with us for the night. I find them on her cluttered dresser and pause for a moment. There’s a dissonance here. The unimportant, almost vulgar accumulation of her latest art projects from the adult day care program and meaningless scraps of yarn or junk mail clash with her elegant jewelry box, jumbled letters and cards from loved ones and close friends, and pretty ceramic dishes she made long ago. It is all evidence of a mind unfastened from reality and consciousness. My eyes shift below this unsettling disorder and rest on a beautifully embroidered dresser scarf that reminds me of how Grandma’s life used to be. There was a time, before it all unraveled, when my grandmother could remember, when her housekeeping was faultless, when she helped me find my glasses. And I had needed those glasses to see the tiny stitches as she taught me the basics of embroidery. Grandma decorated dresser scarves, tablecloths, sheets, and pillow cases, and gave them as gifts. As a second grader I wanted to learn how to do such beautiful work too. I was probably too young to really learn, but I suspect she knew that time was short. I held my little hoop tightly as I worked the tiny silver needle she’d given me from her pin cushion through a practice piece of material. I had wanted to start on a real project right away, but “No,” she said gently, “My mother made me practice on scraps until I knew what I was doing and you should too. It will be good to look back on if you forget something.” And, of course, she was right. She taught me the basic back stitch and simple daisy stitch. I saw one of her pieces and asked her to teach me the fancy satin stitch and the tricky French knot. Then I remember feeling so grown up when she let me use her special embroidery scissors with the glossy brown and gold handles to cut off my leftover thread so that it didn’t turn into a twisted mess. We were both proud when I finished my first piece, a heart shaped doily with pretty pink flowers. Pink was always her favorite color.

As I open a dresser drawer in pursuit of the glasses case, a sea of pink fabric accosts me. I find the case underneath a few articles of clothing as memories again find me. Several years ago, I had been looking through another drawer in this same dresser, perhaps in search of socks or a hairbrush, and had stumbled upon a note. On a scrap of paper that had once been part of an envelope was scrawled in Grandma’s elegant, now slightly shaky hand, “I want to do embroidery tomorrow. I like it.” Tears had stung the back of my eyes. Had she embroidered when that tomorrow came, I wondered? Or had her tomorrow never come with enough cognizance for her to follow through—the note misplaced, ignored, passed over till another day? It seemed impossible and despairingly desperate that she had needed to remind herself that she liked to...
work at such a beloved pastime, one which had previously filled hours and days of her time. Her last pieces were mockeries of what her talent had once been. She no longer understood how to make the pale blue imprint come alive with colorful thread. Instead a confused, chaotic “pattern” had taken shape on the front side of the fabric while the back was one tangled jumble.

My attempts in second grade had been better.

She is dying slowly—before our eyes, and before her own. Alzheimer’s doesn’t fight fair. This death isn’t an abruptly painful end. It’s a repetitive prodding with needles that will not let up. Alzheimer’s never really lets you say goodbye, and yet, the goodbye seems to take forever.

My grandpa kisses her goodbye for the night as we leave his house, taking Grandma to ours. She hasn’t known who he is for awhile, but it brings a big smile to her face. I wonder when she last kissed him and knew he was her husband. Alzheimer’s patients go through several stages of decline; Grandma was in stage six for a considerable amount of time. It is in this stage that patients forget the names of spouses and primary caregivers, are unaware of their surroundings, forget their history, and need constant help with eating, toileting, bathing, and dressing themselves (“Stages of Alzheimer’s”). My atmosphere of reverie is broken as Mom and I brace ourselves for the frustrating procedure of actually getting my grandmother to our house. Grandma’s brain misfires when it tries to send signals to her limbs, instructing them to move. It is a long and difficult process to help her through the confusion of getting into and out of my car, standing up, and walking into the house. My grandmother’s inability to walk and change positions on her own proves that she has progressed, regressed really, to the beginning of stage seven—the final stage (“Stages of Alzheimer’s”).

Tiredly, the three of us shuffle up the sidewalk and enter the house. I feel a heaviness weighing me down and imagine Grandma’s trailing threads of memory wound around my body, squeezing my heart. I take a peek at my mother’s face and detect in her tired features the same underlying strain of feeling trapped. Sadly, unsettling clutter has come to reign in our home too as my mother’s life has been disrupted with the disorder of her mother’s life. It is nine-thirty at night, and Mom cannot think about washing the dirty dishes let alone turning in for the night. My mother starts the half-hour process of getting Grandma ready for bed. I drift out to the kitchen to escape it all, breaking free for the moment.

*Might as well do the dishes,* I muse. I will have no chance of going to sleep or enjoying some moments of uninterrupted reading until she is in bed. For the time being, Grandma’s agitated protestations are interjected every few moments as my mom struggles to help her take off the day’s outfit and put on her pajamas. In spite of it all, the warm dishwater around my hands is somehow soothing to my frustrated feelings. I allow myself to access the good memories again. My mother always tells me about when her mother taught her to wash and dry dishes. Apparently Grandma was impossible to keep up with. Her sudden cry, “Stop it!,” jolts me. *It seems that she still is.* I smile, then sigh. I am washing dishes alone tonight. There is no one to keep up with and no one to share a conversation with. I miss long, rambling talks with my mom about whatever is on my mind or anything we have to tell each other. These days they are almost non-existent as Grandma’s needs or senseless jabbering always seem to interrupt our quality time. *Yes, Grandma, I think, that is what I want too. I want it all to stop. I want my mom back, and I want Mom to have herself back.*

Before Grandma came to live with us, my mom was a whole, unfettered person. A church music and organ major in college, she practiced the organ faithfully during my childhood so that she could play it expertly, glorifying God with her gift on Sundays. I loved waking up on Saturday mornings to soft organ music coming from the basement. The lovely strains of hymns
that floated up as she played held even more beauty for me because I knew that deep down in her soul she believed the powerful words that belonged with the music. She also was the coach for our church’s Bible quizzing team—organized and prepared without fail. Her house was always clean. I remember my dad affectionately teasing her about how her pride in housekeeping ensured that the whole house would to be in order—beds made, floor vacuumed, furniture dusted, and the kitchen spic and span—every time before we left for vacation. When I was in high school, she started giving piano lessons and thoroughly enjoyed being able to share her love of music with eager young students. Whatever she was doing, if the house was quiet, there was always a tune being hummed under her breath.

Now, it seems that most of the time the music within her is set in a minor key. Saturday morning I wake to hear her struggling with my grandmother in the bathroom. Mom explains repeatedly each step needed for her to get into the bathtub so that she can have her bath. None of it makes sense to my grandma. They’re both frustrated, but my mom patiently tries again. I want to turn it all off and go back to sleep. In the afternoon, Mom practices briefly for tomorrow and I know she feels that her musical offering will be inadequate because she has chosen simple pieces she has played before. This crisis only builds. It doesn’t release. Taking care of my grandmother has begun to fray each corner, twisting itself around the center of my mom’s life. Coaching quizzing is a thing of her past. The dishes pile up. The vacuum cleaner rarely leaves the closet. The lessons given on our dusty piano have become a burden. Instead, she spends her time ordering prescriptions, taking Grandma to the bathroom, coordinating help from other caregivers, and scheduling doctors’ visits.

Worst of all, her humming has mostly ceased. I suspect her mind is occupied more with silent prayers for strength now, or silent cries of frustration. It seems strange, but that humming used to drive me crazy. Now, I long for its return. This, I realize, is what gnaws at me most: my mom’s silent suffering that I cannot ease enough to make a difference. I can wash the dishes or massage her tense shoulders, but the unraveling is unrelenting and we must go on living in its wake.

As I place the last dish in the drainer, I hear my mother call my name. It’s time to give Grandma her eye drops. This task is reserved for my dad or me. It is actually kind of fun, like a game. My grandmother will say she is going to hold her eye open—but inevitably squints and closes it right before the drop enters her eye. I have learned to trick her, and most of the time I win. She is developing cataracts in both eyes, but surgery is no longer possible because of her inability to follow the recovery procedures. The drops are in and her eyelids are closed now as the sleeping pill takes effect. It was those eyes, I realize, that once enabled her to thread the tiny eye of the embroidery needles and see each thread’s position as she crafted beautiful patterns.

Needles and eyes. That, I suppose, is the best way to describe how it all feels. Someone, somewhere, has a voodoo doll of my mother and is cursing her, and I can only watch its effects. Each new trial in this crisis is another needle of emotional pain and fatigue jabbed into her body and spirit. The most painful of all, I think, is the sense of injustice she feels. Although my mom wants to be an attentive and conscientious caregiver, she is physically incapable of administering my grandma’s eye drops, driving to the pharmacy for her prescriptions, spying her shoes from across the room, and taking her to my grandpa’s house. She has the responsibility of all of these things, but she is legally blind. For years my mom operated sufficiently with limited sight, depending on others only for needs definitely outside of her abilities such as driving. Her thoroughness, memorization, and organization stepped in to make up for sight limitations in
housecleaning, playing music, and other activities. Now these qualities are pulled taut and wearing thin under the added pressure.

Back in the guestroom, I kiss my grandma goodnight on her wrinkled forehead and a smile breaks over her face as a sweet “Thank you” escapes her lips. These moments will soon pass. Further on in the progression of stage seven she will forget how to smile and even simple speech will disappear (“Stages of Alzheimer’s”). For now, I treasure every subtle, precious peek into the woman she once was. I need these reminders that she is a person too, one who lived life to the fullest for as long as she could. She is a woman with a precious history, the mother who left behind a stamp of beautiful memories in my mom’s life, and the grandmother who was everything a little girl could desire for the first few years of my childhood. In the reduced state of Grandma’s current life, the pattern of memory, meaning, and sense has unraveled for her. But these glimpses remind me to take up a needle and put some stitches back in place, restoring, for a little while, the faint picture in my mind of who she once was.

My grandmother Mildred Trent was beautiful both inside and out. Before her dresser was cluttered in an obsolete mess, I remember specific pictures on display there. One was her photo from her senior class yearbook. Intelligent and kind eyes were framed by stylish hair, delicate features, a good complexion, and a ready smile. Near it was a picture of her wedding. Soon after she married my farm boy grandpa, he was drafted into the Air Force, and her picture won a competition among the men as to who had the prettiest girl. She was also a woman of compassion and love. A wallet sized family portrait of Grandma, Grandpa, my mom, and my uncle had rested on her dresser too. Unable to have any children of her own, she and my grandpa had adopted their two children, giving them the love and security of a family.

She was a woman of faith and initiative. Her weathered Bible was always on her bed stand. Sensitive to God’s call on their lives, my grandparents had spent several years in the backwoods of Kentucky as missionaries when my mom and uncle were young. Later on, they started a Christian bookstore in our town, equipping churches and individuals with Sunday school curriculum, church supplies, and materials encouraging people to grow in their faith. Grandma also organized Vacation Bible Schools and later led the church youth group.

Remembering is what gives my mom little snippets of peace too, I suppose. Yes, the restrictive knot she lives in grows continually more complex and painful. Pulled on one side toward sacrificially loving my grandma, my mom wants to reciprocate kindness to the woman who loved her as her own, cared for her needs, helped her through the struggles of limited sight, and encouraged her to develop her passion for music. Tugged on from another side, she is conscious that in this late stage of the disease, taking care of Grandma leads her to neglect her own needs, exacerbates the difficulties she already has with her vision, and slowly whittles away her passion for music. Most distressing of all, Grandma can no longer significantly feel or respond with the love and gratitude that would make all of my mom’s sacrifice worthwhile. All that Grandma was and did before must be her thanks in the here and now. But Mom and I still have our memories, and, ironically, I think it is by remembering that we fight back the despair and resist the helplessness brought on by a disease that will not relent. Through memory, we remember who the detached, incognizant shell of a woman sitting in our recliner once was—and we defy Alzheimer’s, if only for a few moments at a time.

For my grandmother, fancy embroidery work is no longer even a jotted down possibility. Instead, she haphazardly tries to color inside the lines in a child’s coloring book for a few moments before turning away and staring blankly out the window. Meanwhile, my mom exists in the midst of a daily crisis. There is not much chance for her to think, to choose, to make a
decision that would make her life any easier. So, she goes on with the task of easing and, inevitably, participating in the suffering as my grandma’s mind continues to fray. I, too, am inevitably tied to this suffering. Not only has my relationship with my grandmother shriveled into disrepair, but now my mother and I share a fragile communion that I must wrestle to hold onto. In struggling along with her and helping where I can, I find the most fellowship. It allows us to be together in the only way we possibly can be right now, but of course this situation is far from anything we would chose. The brightest moments I have found are those when I push back the weight—the weight of resentment toward my grandmother and my feelings of helplessness—and allow fleeting moments of healing to come by remembering the way the pattern of Grandma’s life used to make us smile. Through memories, Mom and I find a short pause in the crisis. The tangle we are in becomes a cocoon, still restrictive, but tenderly insulating us from the pain of Grandma’s unraveling long enough to give us the strength to endure.

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Embers burst from the crackling logs and descended to the ground, finding their places amid the dirt. As the next black flakes fell, white ones began to join them. It had gotten colder every day for the past few weeks and we had all been waiting for the first snow. Here it came, floating back and forth through the air then landing on the earth, like nature’s own paratroopers sent from the clouds to christen this day as the day of the first snow fall. We sat on whatever we had turned into a bench or chair and held our breaths as we watched the dark blue sky fill with white. We scrunched closer on the logs, readjusted ourselves on the misshapen rocks, and didn’t say anything because the best words to accompany winter are none at all. It was as if we were trying not to miss or disturb this moment by remaining as still as we felt nature to be, frozen in time.

Cold nights brightened by fires and vaporous breaths disappearing into the black sky are some of the reasons winter is special to me. During your childhood, summer is often the favorite season because there’s no school and you can play outside all day long, but once you come into your own and find what you treasure about the seasons and even about the earth, then you can decide what season you truly love, and why. To some that may come earlier than others. One person could spend half their life before realizing what season appeals to them more than the others while someone else might discover it one strongly nostalgic day in high school. For me, it was a gradual realization throughout my childhood up to now.

Growing up in Connecticut I had an early taste of cold, snow-laden winters. The reasons I love winter the most out of all the other seasons is because of the fond memories made as a child during the frozen months of December, January, and February. There were fun-filled days like the times my best friend and I would pack snow on my front steps and sled down them onto my front lawn surrounded by drifting flakes while hot chocolate brewed in the kitchen. It was a season full of wonderful smells; pies cooling on the porch under a frozen sun, cookies caked in confectionary sugar mirroring the bone dry earth softened by a snowy blanket, and even the faint, sweet hint of burning logs on the air from a wood furnace down the road after a blizzard had left oceans of snow outside my window engrained a calm memory into my senses. A fond memory of mine from when I was six or seven was a time when my sister and I had the crazy notion to run outside in our bathing suits and “swim in the snow.” While other mothers might deter us from this action, mine ran outside and took pictures. It was simply one of those things that allowed you to embrace nature in its fullest. I can still feel my bare skin enveloped in snow, the cold bite with a kiss of warmth. Even now, recalling all those magnificent winter days, I start loving that season more than I already do.

Of course, each season is special in its own way, but winter has a vast array of details with something that can appeal to everyone. For the religious, many holidays occur during the winter months, including Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. Holidays can be a wonderful way to bring family together and reflect on fond memories. Winter is a perfect time for reflection and identifying what we believe because when nature is at its simplest, when you can almost feel the curves of its body, your life becomes simpler too. Everyone needs time to
examine their beliefs. Perhaps that is why we would rather be inside away from the cold during the dark hours of winter. It is a chance to look inside ourselves.

Frozen winter nights are the perfect encouragement for those who tend to wander outside their house to stay in for once. It becomes an invitation for people to gather around a warm fire or get to know one another better through a fun game. Winter, however, is not the favorite season of most individuals. A poll done by Rasmussen Reports found that 31% of Americans enjoy summer the most, 29% spring, and 25% fall, while only a small 7% call winter their favorite season. For the 7% who love the cold, as I do, winter is a time to get out into a vastly different environment from the rest of the year, such as that time right after a blizzard has passed through and there is a happy mix of silence, tranquil lighting, and good company. These examples, of course, are also dependent on the area where someone lives. A person who lives in the city can have a great difference of opinion than that of someone in the country, simply due to their environment. I would like to think, however, that some reasons for loving winter can be universal.

Appealing to our imaginations, winter can seem like a different world. It is a world filled with fantasy and impossibilities that normally no one would believe in, but in the middle of a snow-laden December it is hard to simply disregard the fantastic, because in a world where water transforms into snow and bustling streets become frozen deserts, it seems like anything can happen. Perhaps this is why mystical characters like Santa Clause and wonderful stories like The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe revolve around this idea that winter is a breeding ground for the fantastic. Santa Clause is one of the most identifiable fictional characters for winter. He lives at the North Pole where it is always winter, and only visits the rest of the world during winter. He has become the poster boy for the winter season, and why not? He’s jolly, friendly and resembles the warmth and kindness that all of us look for during winter.

Full of fantasy, C. S. Lewis’ The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe shows how a world full of winter can be a magnificent escape from the dreariness of a rainy spring day. Bundling up in fur coats, the children embark on adventures that, if set in any other season, would seem much more mundane than the bleached white world of Narnia in a state of continuous winter. Even though the victory is found in ridding Narnia of winter, it seems that once it is gone, the world loses some of its mysterious beauty. Everything seems more realistic and less of what made Narnia so interesting and wonderful. C. S. Lewis displays this best at the moment when Edmund first discovers Narnia. He reveals his own love for it when he writes, “There was crisp, dry snow under his feet and more snow lying on the branches of the trees. Overhead there was a pale blue sky, the sort of sky one sees on a fine winter day in the morning” (25). Reading this, with the sharp contrast of summer on the other side of the wardrobe, I feel refreshed by the texture of the snow and comforted by the colors of a winter sky. One of the reasons it seems so magical is because of the strong difference between summer and winter. Once the winter is gone, everything seems far too similar to that of the world they left. The power of winter at the beginning of the story which pulls each child through the wardrobe and into Narnia is what grips you at the start and intrigues you enough to encourage further reading.

When discussing someone’s favorite season, the answers will differ between people because of what they value in nature and in their own lives. Still, I see a little love for winter in everyone. It can be the desire to escape from the normalcy of other seasons, the need to experience that first snow, or maybe the simple yearning to put on a warm coat and feel the cold nip at your face. Perhaps it’s the mystery that seems to emit from the emptiness of nature making the detective in each of us strive to uncover it. Andrew Wyeth, a realist painter known
as “the painter of the people,” once said, “I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape—the loneliness of it, the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show.” When we can find the earth at its simplest, that is when we can begin to understand it. There can be a connection with nature when it doesn’t have any frills or complications to hide behind but when it instead gives us a fresh breath of imagination that lets us see a world much like C. S. Lewis’. It is then we can all enjoy a particular season, fully appreciating what it offers us. I, for one, will always keep winter close to my heart, cherishing the memories it has given me. I need to run my hand along the bones of nature, to feel alive amidst its death, and to search out the story to its completion.

Andrew Wyeth, “Sunday Times”
http://www.andrewwyeth.com/AndrewWyeth7.html

Work Cited

Courtney Coiro  
Professor James Zoller  
Honorable Mention

What Makes a Book a Classic?

Over the summer I read *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell, a female novelist who wrote in the period immediately after that of Jane Austen. Considering the two authors together made me wonder why Austen became widely revered and Gaskell’s audience remains small. A number of factors contribute to a literary work becoming a “classic.” The spirit of the time in which it was written will determine what its immediate reception will be. Harold Bloom mentions that genres of writing go through varying degrees of esteem and thus the perceived quality of a work depends significantly on when it was written and when it is being read (21). A number of people with power—publishers and critics—can prevent or encourage a work’s publication and promote, criticize, or ignore a work. Their opinions on its worth carry much weight. And there is always a certain measure of random chance to a book’s success regarding whether it finds an appreciative sponsor, is widely read, or even gets into the public sphere at all. But from a literary point of view, a work must have certain qualities that enable it to stand the test of time.

Harold Bloom, professor at Yale University, is a major proponent of the traditional canon of classic literature. His introduction to *The Western Canon* mentions several characteristics present in all its works. The book that lasts has fulfilled the expectations it provokes; for example, in theme—a book will not be great if it addresses a critical issue yet fails to give a compelling perspective, if not an answer (19). The quality of a book corresponds with its degree of originality, but at the same time, great books are ones that respond to predecessors (25, 27). Many classic authors seek to correct works that came before them, and thus the whole collection contains “conflict, ambivalence, contradiction between subject and structure” (27). The giants of the canon “overwhelm and subsume the tradition” (28). A work’s aesthetic strength is found in the author’s “mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction” (29) and its ability to evoke memory in positive and negative ways (38).

Bloom speaks of literary works as “achieved anxieties,” in which we see ourselves, our fears and our best dreams. Shakespeare is the master of achieving world-wide appeal through portraying humanity’s common essence: “he puts their lives on his stage,” no matter what culture readers may come from (38-39). Bloom also says that the canon gives us “capacity for cognition” (40). The classic books provide us with a framework to think about the world and ideas. Finally, a book worthy of canonization always demands re-reading. There is so much substance and depth that it cannot be fully grasped on a first reading, or even a fifth (30). All these characteristics are indirectly pointed out within a defense of the traditional Western canon, and the assumption is that any book that meets these qualities is worthy to be included in “the great” list of books.

Jeff Baldwin has a unique view on how to choose classics. He is research director at Worldview Academy, a nondenominational institution that helps young Christians learn and apply a biblical world view, mainly through intensive summer camps. Worldview also provides multiple conferences and resources, including a high school classical literature curriculum designed by Baldwin. His approach to “great books” deals less with the traditional canon than with discretion in personal reading. There is so much reading material available, and “the
“canon” is even far too big to be read thoroughly. How should we choose what to read and what can be passed by? In his essay on *The Twelve Trademarks of Great Literature*, he re-thinks the traditional notions of regarding books as classics. Instead of basing judgments on the general populace or the reader’s subjective opinion, Christians should uphold an objective standard for greatness that flows from the character of our God (11). It begins with content and theme—simply whether a book glorifies the good and discourages evil. This is not as straightforward as it may seem. *The Three Musketeers*—a widely acknowledged “great book”—fails this test because the goal of the protagonists is to use glory to seduce other men’s wives, but the story of *Robin Hood*, in which the protagonist is a thief and outlaw, succeeds because readers cheer for the good in the archer instead of the evil of the sheriff (19-20). Baldwin has found most classics to already satisfy this moral criterion.

But that is not the whole question—as Baldwin writes, “not everyone who knows truth can write” (12). The prominent discussion of great books is about form, which some critics notice often correlates with the value of a work’s content (16). Baldwin says that general revelation means that we can know what objective beauty is, seeing “how aesthetics can reflect the character of God” (12). Beauty must consist of order and light: in literature, this means “complex and fulfilling” language with “proportion, balance, symmetry, and rhythm” and skillful management of “contrast and movement” (13). Even though good form is hard to define objectively, it is still possible to assess the quality of literature.

Baldwin then recommends a list of twelve trademarks of great literature, most of which are widely acknowledged, such as appropriate pacing, proper perspective, flow and rhythm, economy and precision of words, at least one sympathetic character, and distinctive voice. Great literature rewards active re-reading, shows instead of telling, “expresses the inexpressible,” and moves the reader. Baldwin gives a uniquely Christian twist to what he presents as the most significant requirement for a great work: moral tension driving the plot. Moral tension is generally recognized as a sign of a classic book, but Baldwin gives a concrete reason for this: such tension relies on God’s absolute standards that are written on every person’s heart (Baldwin 17). Finally, he applies the instruction of Philippians 4:8 to reading—we should choose books that are not only excellent, but noble, right, pure, and admirable, according to God’s standards.

In the world where literary considerations mix with culture and politics, a book with a great theme, compelling characters, and excellent wording is not guaranteed to be an everlasting success. There is a keystone beyond the list—an indefinable quality to the books that people continuously love often termed “style” or “voice.” What *Pride and Prejudice*’s Miss Bingley says of the accomplished woman can be easily applied to classic literature: “and besides all this, she must possess *a certain something* in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved” (Austen 33). Style or voice has to do with wording, humor, detail, sentence structure, tone, and other elements that reveal the writer’s own or assumed personality as the narrator, but it is the most difficult feature to define.

Of course, there are always exceptions to every good rule: some classics fall outside these requirements, and many good books go unrecognized. But regardless of exceptions, these evaluations are still useful for readers and for writers. Readers need standards for forming opinions on books, and writers can imitate and respond to the best, while also recognizing the need for originality, to make their work better. Many factors go into the success of a book or lack thereof, but it is not random chance—the books that become classics are works of quality in terms of their writing and theme(s) and the author’s approach.
Works Cited

Regn and the Man with No Shadow

The sun was hot, and the dust clung to the roof of Regn’s mouth. He took a firmer grip on his staff as he continued down the dusty road. A forest began not far off and Regn was eager for some shade. One large oak was just off the path, its dusty green boughs becoming. As Regn came under the shadow, he paused. There was a man nestled in the curve of one broad root, apparently asleep. Regn wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and sat down. The man opened his eyes and looked at him. “Ah,” he said, craning his neck to look at the sun. “Early. How appropriate.”

Regn looked at him, puzzled. “How did…?”
“Mm. Yes that's the question, isn't it?” the man said. “How.”
He reached into the low branches where a burlap sack was tied, and withdrew some fruit and a waterskin, tossing them to Regn. “You see, I was prepared,” the man said as he walked out into the sunlight.

Regn rose and followed. Though the water was warm, it washed the dust from his mouth. Wiping his lips, he raised the waterskin and said, “May your spring never run dry.” Taking another sip, Regn asked, “How did you know I was coming?”

The man turned and gazed at Regn for a moment as a shadow passed over his face. A faint whispering in the air, the soft sound of wind brushing leaves. Regn glanced into the sky expecting a bird or a cloud, but there was none; the sun shone down from the blue. Regn was confused. The man smiled. “My shadow told me.” Regn looked down. From his feet, stretching out in front of him, streamed his own shadow. But behind the stranger there was none. His shadow was on his face.

“You are Vari,” Regn said. “You are the one Ayo told me about.”
As Regn watched, the shadow slid down to the ground in front of Vari, mingling with Regn’s own shadow.

“I’ve never seen that kind of magic before,” said Regn. “I’ve only seen allucin magic, spells of illusion. This,” he said, watching the shadow flutter behind, before, to the tree, “this is new.”

Vari raised his hand, palm cupped. His shadow flowed up his legs, down his arm, to collect in a pool of dark, translucent grey in the hollow of his hand. “It is part of what is called mirer magic. It takes four forms: shadows, echos, reflections, and—”

“Dreams,” Regn said.
Vari smiled. “Yes, dreams. How did you know?”
“It’s why I came. I was told to seek a man named Vari who lived in the side of a tall green hill, by a wide green stream, who knew things no other man or woman knew, and who had no shadow.”

Vari laughed. “Well, as you see, I have a shadow. But it is often gone on errand, and if you wait a moment, I will send it again.”

Vari was looking into the sky, so Regn followed his gaze. A cloud was moving through the sky, and Regn could see the shadow of it sweeping over the green hills. In moments it passed over them and as it did, Vari opened his hand, and Regn saw a dark blot of grey join the shadow.
on the ground. Then it was gone, and Vari’s shadow with it. Vari gazed after it. “When the
weather is good, I can send my shadow around the world, traveling though land and sea with the
sun, and returning to me at the same hour the next day. That is how I knew of your coming, by
the way,” he said, gazing at Regn. “My shadow brings me news from across the earth, and it
rarely takes the same path twice. Follow me, and we will go eat and drink, and you can tell me
why you have come, and what dreams have to do with it.”

“My name is Desi,” Regn said. He did not want this man to know yet that he was Regn
the Dragon-Looser, or even that he was a wizard. “Desi,” said Vari. “A seeker…but of what I
wonder?” He sighed, and slinging the waterskin and burlap sack over a shoulder, he started off
toward the west, where a tall green hill lay in the distance. “Come, Desi, and you shall know the
warmth of a good fire and good food.”

The sun was falling toward the horizon in a blaze of red, coloring the whole sky. Regn
stood on the threshold of the door into the hill, which opened to the west. Vari was laying bread
on the hearth. He came and stood beside Regn, gazing at the ocher sky. “Red sky at night,
shepherd’s delight.” Vari said. “Tomorrow will be a good day, but the day after…” His voice
trailed off.

Regn turned, and sat beside the fire across from Vari. Vari took a loaf, and tore off a
small piece, offering the larger piece to Regn. He took it gratefully, taking a bite and chewing
reflectively. “It’s very good,” he said.

Vari smiled. “I’m glad. We have a saying here: ‘Hunger is the best seasoning,’ and we
also say: ‘The bread of strangers can be very hard.’ So can their words. Especially lies.”

Regn looked up from the fire.

Vari leaned back on the rush rug. “I know you are a wizard. Your staff is fashioned ofa
wood from a far-off land in the south, Sunden as I recall. The local inhabitants called it fuil-adhmad—bloodwood; or dearg-adhmad—red wood. It is a heavy wood, strongly connected to
the elements of earth and water.” Vari pointed to Regn’s neck. “The fastening of your cloak is
brass, worn to defend one against magic and direct it back to the sender. Your belt is clasped
with iron, also reflecting and absorbing magic, especially dream-sendings. Your bag is closed
with steel, and the bag of amber sand is bound with ebony lined with lead and made of
dragonskin, all used for defensive and protective magic.”

Vari paused, almost closing his eyes. “You are a man hunting, yet haunted and hunted
yourself. The thing you pursue and which follows you is born of fire. You are a man without rest
or sleep, whose mind is tortured by dreams and nightmares. And so you have come to me,
hoping to escape the dreams. But there is no escaping a dragon.”

Regn frowned. “I have never denied that I set Ther free.”

Vari held up a finger. “Perhaps not to yourself, but when you deny the truth to others, all
the other truth you might have said must pass through that same lie. If a man says to me ‘Your
grain has burned up,’ and he is guilty of the destruction himself, then he has spoken a lie. The truth is ‘I burned your field.’ But,” Vari continued, “I will not withhold my help from you. All men are brothers, it is said, even those who loose dragons.”

Regn took another bite of bread. “I have come to you because of a vow I made: To pursue the dragon Ther until I stop him, or until he dies, or I die. It has been twenty-three years since I loosed him, and I have only ever seen him in my dreams. That is how he has made me into the hunted. He sends me dreams: I see the faces of all those Ther has slain; every night he reminds me that an unbound dragon is free forever, and that there is no hope.”

Vari pursed his lips. “Is there any hope?”

Regn laughed humorlessly. “Precious little. Surely your shadow has told you that what Ther says is true: A dragon can only be bound once, and once loosed, is forever free. Ther is old. He was old when the world was young, and he is powerful. There is little hope of slaying him. Even Eyal, the warrior-king of Radomer, fell to a dragon, and that was over a thousand years ago. The only hope I have is in my master’s last words, and they are a riddle.” Regn lapsed into silence. “I do not hold hope for escape,” he said at last, “only relief. A drop of water to cool my burning tongue. Peace for a wearied mind. I want to be able to sleep through the night.”

Vari made a sucking noise through his teeth. “Well, I have never worked magic with dragon’s dreams before, but I will do what I can for you. For now, try to sleep, and I will find one who may be able to help us.”

Regn swallowed the last bit of bread. “My name is Regn,” he said.

Vari smiled as he stood and went to the door. “Vari. Try to sleep, and I will be here in the morning.”

Regn closed his eyes, rolled over on the rushes, pulled his cloak over his head. He slept as he had nearly every night since the dragon was freed: sweating and shaking, crying out in fear, and waking to sit and stare into the smoldering embers and wait for morning.

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When morning came, it was indeed a good morning, and for that Regn was glad. The sun burned the dew away, but left behind a freshness and a lightness that lingered. Regn walked outside to see Vari hoeing in his garden, occasionally glancing up at the sky. He stooped and picked some peas and lentils, putting them in a woven rush basket. “Good morning, Regn,” he said.

“Good morning.”

A cloud’s shadow came racing through the green of the valley, sweeping shade over them. Regn saw the familiar blot of Vari’s shadow color his face grey, and Regn again heard the whispering, sighing sound of wind in the trees. Then the cloud passed, and Vari’s shadow lay on the ground like any other.

“My shadow has found one who may be able to help you. She lives in Gita.”

“Gita?” Regn’s face grew clouded. “That’s almost a year’s journey.”

Vari nodded. “Yes, but I may be able to help you there. How soon do you wish to leave? Can you leave now, or at least before nightfall?”

“Yes. I can leave immediately. I have no affairs that must be ordered.”

Vari gazed at him for a moment, then turned—leaving his basket—and headed to the broad stream beside the hill. Regn followed as Vari led him to a small green pool, surrounded by rushes. They pushed through to the water’s edge, and Regn looked into the still water. The clouds, the morning sun, and Regn himself were reflected in its cool green depths.
“Now, watch,” said Vari, stretching a hand over its surface. His shadow flowed and fell off his fingertips like soundless, weightless water into the green stillness. The water grew dark until all Regn could see was blackness. He looked at Vari, who was seated on the pool’s edge, his eyes closed. “Watch,” Vari said again. Regn looked back, and now saw a night sky, with a crescent moon and stars in the water, yet the morning sun still fell in rush-filtered green around them. Vari opened his eyes and stood. “I have opened a portal to a body of water not far from Gita. When you sink below this water, you will surface there. But once you arrive, I will not be able to open another to call you back. That journey will be long should you wish to return.”

Regn hefted his staff and tucked his cloak into his belt, then hesitatingly waded out into the middle of the little pool. The water came to his knees and felt like any other water: cold and wet and soaking Regn’s clothes. As he stood there shivering, he reached into the dragonskin bag of amber sand at his shoulder. Taking a few grains, he sprinkled them on the water.

“Water-mirror, hear, I pray.
“Speed me swiftly on my way,” he said.

The grains of sand flared and sank into the other sky, joining the light of those stars. He looked up at Vari. “To ease the transition, I hope.”

Vari nodded. “Farewell Regn. When you arrive in Gita, seek a woman who has woven that which cannot be held. She may be the only one who can take hold of the dreams the dragon sends you. And remember, know thyself, be true, and fear no darkness.”

Regn sucked in a breath and sank below the water.

At first nothing seemed to happen. The water soaked into his hair, his skin, his clothes. It pressed its cold fingers on his eyelids and into his ears. Sitting on the cold, muddy bottom of the pool, Regn opened his eyes and looked up. He could see the sky over Gita, and he saw his own reflection gazing down at him. He sighed inwardly and stood. His head broke the surface and a blast of cold struck his face. The water turned much colder, the ground seeming to drop away. The vast southern night sky wheeled above him, with the winter constellations gleaming down. A low stone wall rose around him, and he could almost reach from one side to the next. He was in a cistern. Sloshing out of the water, he lay on the ground, shivering and thankful that his cloak was made of wool. Standing, he took his staff and started to the first house which had a light in the windows.

As he walked down the beaten dirt street, he ran his fingers through his dripping hair and beard, trying to shake the water away. The sound of a wailing baby echoed from a house down on the left, so Regn went there, hoping the mother would be awake and charitable. Regn stopped on the threshold, the sound of a woman hushing and cooing mingled with and soothed away the baby’s cries. He knocked on the lintel. “Hello? Please, I need help.”

“Come in.”

Regn entered, striking the door three times and saying, “In peace I, a stranger, come,” and he took another step, stamping three times and saying “Peace be on this house, which welcomes me,” then clapping three times and saying “May no good thing befall me if I break this peace between us.”

Laughter came from a room in the corner of the house. “Well said.” Regn came into the room, lit by the warm glow of the fire. A cradle was before the fire, being rocked by a short, stout woman clothed in a shawl and dress. She was stroking the child’s head, barely visible in a mound of swaddling.

Regn knelt by the door. “Thank you, Lady, for taking me in.”
She stood and turned to him, smiling broadly. “You are well come, stranger. Stand by the fire, the night is cold.”

Regn came and knelt beside the cradle, stretching his hands to the fire. The woman bent and stroked the babe’s forehead. As she moved, Regn heard the sound of water running over stones; the hum of insects; the soft, throaty sound of the great owl. Her shawl gleamed as the firelight fell on it, but there were velvety threads of darkness woven through it. The swaddling that wrapped the baby was thick and dark, woven of stuff Regn had never seen.

“I am called Regn, Lady,” Regn said.

“Aysuila,” she said, smiling. “Did you make that cloak?” she asked, pointing to Regn’s cloak, dripping and patched.

“No,” Regn said smiling. “My mother made it for me, years ago.”

“It was well made, and well used. That beautiful red color, erith, isn’t it? A rare plant, that one. I haven’t seen it around here in years. She made you a noble gift.”

“Yes, she did,” Regn answered. “And what of your shawl; what is it woven of?”

Aysuila ran the edge of the shawl through her fingers, closing her eyes. “I wove this shawl four years ago, when I lived in my homeland. It was a place of mighty forests, and peace. When my husband learned of his father’s illness here, we left. But the night we left, I sat outside all night, and wove the sounds of the woods, and the color of the night sky, and the smell of those trees, so that I would always have it with me. And it soothes Torgny here,” she said, adjusting a fold of his blanket. “His wrap I wove of the silence of a midnight under the new moon, and the warmth of the sun, and the soft thickness of the beaver’s hide.”

Regn listened with amazement. “So you are the one I come seeking. You are the one who can weave that which cannot be held.”

Aysuila seemed unperturbed. She took a blanket from the hearth, and laid Regn’s wet cloak in its place. “Here,” she said, holding the blanket out to him. “Wrap yourself in this.”

Regn took it gingerly and settled it around his shoulders. He felt a summer-warmed breeze, felt the gentle heat of sun-kissed sand, heard the laughter of children, and snatches of a haunting melody played as by a shepherd on the side of a mountain in the heat of the day. He closed his eyes and let the laughter and song and warmth seep into his body. “It’s wonderful,” he said softly.

Aysuila smiled broadly. “Good. It makes me happy to know that I did well. I do so love to weave. But,” she said, rising with the sound of waves crashing on the shore, “you did not come to me to wrap yourself in a blanket.”

A chill reached through the warmth enveloping Regn, and he shivered. It was as if a soft, cold hand had been laid on his side. “No,” he said. “I came to ask for your help.”

“I will do what I can,” Aysuila said.

“I have come to ask…” and Regn realized that he wasn’t sure how to ask for Aysuila’s help. “I am plagued by dreams, sent to me from one who bodes me no goodwill. I have come in the hope that you, who can take hold of so many intangible things, can grasp even the dreams…of a dragon.”

Aysuila’s face grew no grimmer, and her smile did not dim. “I will do all I can. What do you want the dreams to go into?”

Regn thought, gazing at his wet cloak. “A cistern for the dreams,” he said. “I want them to be drawn away from me, like the iron draws the needle, and I want to be able to keep them. I may find use in them one day.”
“A net is what you’ll be wanting then. A catcher of dreams. But what shall be its warp and weft?” she asked. “All woven things need a warp and weft.”

Regn traced a pattern, the Endless Knot, in the ashes of the hearth. “The weft shall be made of earth and water, because they are the elements in opposition to those born of fire and air, and the warp shall be the dragon’s dreams.”

Aysuila nodded. “Good. I will weave the frame in the morning, and tomorrow night I will finally weave something even I have never woven.”

Regn let the wonderful blanket slip from his shoulders. “And I, because I woke only a few hours ago, will go for a walk.” He stood and walked out of the room, leaving Aysuila stroking Torgny’s forehead and weaving the light of the fire into his golden hair.

Regn returned to the house the next evening, exhausted. He had been walking and thinking and hoping all night and all day. Aysuila was hanging great swathes of dark cloth in the windows and doors. A man, with long plaited hair and beard, came through the door, carrying the babe. He stopped for a moment to stoop and kiss Aysuila’s forehead, then headed down the road. Aysuila looked over at Regn as she tapped the little tacks into the tapestry. “Ciardha is taking the babe to his brother’s for the night, because the house must be completely still for what we have set ourselves to do. I have hung everything I can think of to help us. The stillness of the stars in the sky; the quiet of the far west, in the middle of the desert at night; all the calm and peace and strength I have ever known.”

“Thank you,” said Regn.

“And,” Aysuila continued, “I finished the dreamcatcher. I wove it like a basket: the ribs are twisted of ice and rock, and the weavers will be the dreams the dragon sends you. I mixed every calling I could into the ribs: all the cries of children for mothers, of lovers for lovers, of birds calling the sun and the moon up from their places. I can only hope it will be enough.”

“You have done so much for me already,” Regn said. “I will be forever in your debt.”

“There is no debt. You have given me a task to do which has strained all the skill I have in the pursuit of what I love most to do in the world. What debt could there be for that? Does the wind demand payment for the freedom to blow where it wishes; or the eagle for the joy of its flight? No, and neither do I. Indeed, I thank you for the gift you have given me. I spent much of the night weaving Torgny’s dreams into a gift for you.”

“For me?” Regn asked. “You humble me.”

Aysuila beckoned him inside, and as he entered, he could feel the silence, but also an openness, as though the roof of that house were the vaunted arch of the heavens instead of the low beams he stooped to avoid. Aysuila had laid a mat before the fire, the dreamcatcher at the head. Every time Regn looked at it, he found he could not grasp it as it must be. The firelight flickering over it made its shape waver and change; now translucent as ice, now a stone that had grown like a flower, now outstretched arms and wings and the open sky itself. And then a basket, only half finished, with firelight gleaming though the skeleton of it.

Aysuila bent and took Regn’s cloak from the floor. “I wove the dreams—and the wonder of the child who dreamed them—into a pattern of silence and strength and warmth, for a balm to all the years you have suffered, and to remind you of hope.”

Regn saw a hood, woven into his cloak with the red of sunset and the ruddy cheek of youth and the bloom of the roses and the blush of apples in spring. Aysuila stroked it gently, and held it out to Regn. “Please, put it on, and sleep, and we shall see how skilled my fingers are.” Regn settled the cloak around his shoulders, and lay down. He pulled the hood up over his head, and a peace and joy suffused him as he had never known. Surely tonight, with such wonders
around him and such a kind heart beside him, the dragon’s dreams would have no power. And as
Regn fell asleep, he saw Aysuila plucking gossamer threads of fire from the air, her fingers
dancing and glowing, and a smile on her face as delighted and serene as the smile of the full
moon.

That night, Regn dreamed his own dreams for the first time in many years. In his dreams,
he saw a dwarf guarding a small door in a mountainside…. He saw a sword, shining and bright,
drawn from its scabbard and held aloft in a crowded hall. A voice, sharp and clear as crystal,
rang out. “I was forged by Dvalinn, in the deeps of the earth, and these are my deeds….” He saw
a raven perched over a dry well…. He saw a boat of stone sailing beneath the moon, with a mast
of dragonbone…. 

Regn opened his eyes to see Aysuila gazing at him with a twinkle in her eye. Her dress
today was a brilliant purple, and Regn thought he could see an evening sky with thick clouds
drifting across the stars. He looked to his left, and saw the dreamcatcher there, full to the brim of
liquid fire. He looked back at Aysuila. “It works,” he said softly. Aysuila nodded, smiling. “Yes,
in a fashion. It was a long night, and for all the thinness of the threads, my fingers are tired and
worn. I must draw the dreams from the ether, so the cistern will only work while you are here.
But sleep, and fear no darkness.”

Regn laid his head back on the pillow woven of sun-warmed water. “If only for a while,
it works,” he said, then closed his eyes and went back to sleep, and this time his sleep was so
deep and peaceful that he did not dream again.
Drip

A Word of Introduction

“Drip” is an amalgamation of many thoughts on life into a brief hint at a tapestry of love, paradox, faith, psychology, relationships, perspective, the fantastical, the hardships of humanity, and most of all: hope. The title itself allows numerous references to remain bound up in one word. The boy in the story is but one drop in the stormy history of human lives, and this story itself is meant to ripple the waters of the reader’s thoughts softly as a drop falling into a pool. More obviously, the story is set in the drizzling atmosphere of a common London day and the sometimes beautiful, sometimes depressing commentary on life made by the drip of a falling rain drop after having engaged with some object between it and the ground.

I thought the challenge of telling the story with unnamed characters was worth the reward of perceived intimacy. The reader is invited to engage with the boy as if he or she knows his name and he assumes that the reader knows the girl he is speaking of. This assumed knowledge not only adds an element of intimacy but also allows the story to remain slightly abstract and more applicable to the reader’s own experiences.

The boy of the story is confronted with a dilemma when his closest friend seems to believe in this strange and unbelievable other world. For the first half of the short story, the reader is left speculating on what it is that the boy does not believe. During these pages when the reader is still in the dark, questions of relationships, trust, and unfaithfulness and disbelief toward otherwise trustworthy people are raised and considered in a more abstract way.

The reader is invited to share the struggles the boy faces coming from a broken home, as well as the fear he finds when faced with a loving family and strong example of sincere care on the part of his friend’s parents.

The girl is a psychological and sociological look at the power of subtlety, consistency, honesty, and sincerity through engagement with people and the influence that can have. She never waivers from what she believes, but neither does she waiver from dedication to her friend. She is grieved by his disdain and rejection, but not angered. Her forgiveness of him does not require an apology from him; his simple reappearance brings joy to her. She is a steady friend who does not cease to hope and care.

By the end of the story, the boy, recounting the story from some un-established later date, references the events of this story as the beginning of a turning point in his perceptions of life. The reader is left to consider the events themselves and in some small sense participate in the things that were the beginnings of a lifetime-euchatastrophe for the boy.

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Drip. Drip. Plop, came the sound of the drizzling rain and the large drops falling from the eave of the Underground entrance. A sea of black umbrellas continued to pour into the station as people everywhere rushed to work. We stood there, out of the rain, cold and miserable. It wasn’t the rain or the cold that made us miserable. It was…well, she was being such a sod and then grew silent when I didn’t take her seriously. That was worse. I wanted her to forget about it and lighten up, but somehow made things worse still.
We had been the best of mates for over a year, since we were six, that is, and we were then both eight, or she was to be in a week. I don’t understand how things like this happen. There we were, two people who cared more about each other than any prize imaginable, yet miserable all because we couldn’t understand each other. I couldn’t figure why she was so put out. And she didn’t seem to understand that I just wanted to make it up and forget about the silly thing.

Across the way I saw the Old Master, as everyone called him, under another small shelter selling tulips. My mom likes tulips. She’d grown quite angry and yelled at me when I bumped the buffet and her vase of tulips crashed to the floor. I forgave her, though. Forgiving is so hard. Oh, I don’t go in for it much, but I figure it’s the easiest way to move on with the day and not be plagued with continual reruns of the incident in my mind, constantly analyzing what happened, and why, all the while getting crosser and crosser at the unfairness of it all. It is hard, though, terribly hard to excuse someone when they’ve hurt you. Of course the slap wasn’t what really hurt.

The rain continued. The crowd was thinning. She slid her back down the wall to a sitting position next to me, all the while holding her gaze on the dimmed shape of the trees barely discernable through the mist and rain. She says that forgiveness for the sake of moving on is a young forgiveness. How forgiveness could mature beyond that I don’t know. She seems to think there is something else, something deeper. I don’t understand her. Sometimes she comes up with the strangest ideas, too strange even for me. She gets her oddity from her parents. She says that on almost every occasion of waking up in the late evenings after going to bed, she can here her father and mother lying in bed reading out loud to each other. They read together every night. I envy her. She says they have recently been reading a book called some strange thing like, “The Dumb Ox.” We had a good laugh about it. She hasn’t been able to make out, from what little she has heard, where the ox comes in. Her parents would occasionally have me join them for dinner. They were really nice. I liked them, but was always afraid of them after leaving. The happiest moments I have known were sitting at their table listening to them talk and laugh. That is why I was always so afraid of them afterward. I loved her, though. Looking over at her still sitting against the wall, I wondered briefly how strange it was that I should be afraid of her parents, but never once of her. I loved her just as much as her and they seemed to love me.

Then it happened. From that moment on I began to have doubts or glimpses I don’t know which. Maybe they are the same thing. Only the doubts are perhaps nothing more than unrecognized glimpses. Doubts, glimpses, whatever you call them, some kind of mirage appeared for a moment and then was gone. I wondered if I was merely tricking myself into seeing something so that she and I could be on the same page again. Perhaps if I saw what she saw, we could be best of mates in this new way as well. I was terribly afraid of somehow being left behind. I once read of an ambassador that was left behind, a sad story. But no, I disbelieved her too much to have made it up. And yet, it was too unbelievable to be believed. She ran.

Through the rain I followed. Across the streets. I tried to catch up with her, but was caught in a crowd she’d narrowly escaped. Through the wet, black coats I elbowed and pushed. I could see her running. Up the path towards those trees she went. Why does she run so? I knew why. I had seen it too, but began now to doubt my own eyes. I think I should have forgotten it then had her fleeting figure not forced me to accept that something had happened which we both saw for a moment back under the Underground covering.

Why didn’t she wait for me? Of course, I refused to go with her before and said I wouldn’t be taken for a fool by participating in such games on this side of town. She had reached
the trees and started to climb. She was soon out of sight, climbing behind the larger one in front of the small cluster.

As little as I expected anything to come of the whole ordeal, I maintained an unswerving eye on the grouping of trees as I ran, and—though I would have denied it then—I think a part of me wanted to see it again. To see what? I didn’t know. I couldn’t remember clearly what we had seen. I remember perfectly what happened next.

All of a sudden I found myself standing. The only thing that seemed to move was a single tear forming and running down my cheek. A loud booming wave of silence filled the air. No automobiles, no voices, not even the sprinkling sound of rain, just silence. The kind of silence I have since known at times when the heart perceives something so beautiful or deafeningly sad as if from another realm. One’s whole world seems to dim and the sound of silence presses in on you until the last thing you remember hearing is the drawn-out beat of your heart as if ages pass between each beat. It might be called an ecstasy of emotion, whether in a good moment or a painful time; but if so, it is the kind that one does not choose but that is suddenly forced upon one. Anyone who has known deep love with a friend and on a enjoyable day is suddenly greeted with the words, “there has been an accident, your friend is dead,” will know this kind of silence.

The wave of silence can be dreadful, or wonderful, but it is always deafening. It was a silence of the good kind, but overwhelming nonetheless. It filled everything. The light blazed. I never knew something so beautiful and perfect, yet terrifying. I can’t do it justice by description, but as describing it is the best I can do for those I don’t know, I will try. It appeared to be either a kind of portal to some unknown world, or an object that didn’t seem to fit in a three dimensional world. There were qualities and facets that I could not have imagined and cannot describe. It was clearly not a part of this world, yet seemed to fit perfectly. As in stories when the ending is so perfect yet equally unlooked for. Like the teacher who answers a complex question in a way that both fulfills and furthers understanding and wonder to encompass more mystery and knowledge than the questioner dreamed. In the same way this light and glimpse of another world seemed to complement, enrich, and fill the world as a key fits a lock, or as poetry deepens a proof.

I found myself staring into a new crescent celestial sphere: perhaps a moon, perhaps a planet, perhaps something else. Darkness surrounded it, but even the darkness seemed to radiate the otherworldly light that dissolved whatever branches might have obstructed the portal from view. Although it seemed to radiate there for countless hours turning our overcast day into a veritable night, after the length of time it takes for the heart to beat three times it was gone. I gasped for breath. Looking around I saw that almost everyone seemed not to have noticed it. One middle-aged gentlemen stood staring at the place the light had been as if momentarily lost in thought. He seemed to be pondering something, perhaps recalling some thoughts from the past. He sighed, a faint smiling sigh, also looked around, and took a deep breath through his nose, taking in the smells of rain, flowers, and cool air before continuing on up the path.

I ran to the trees. She was gone. I felt the wet earth soak through my trousers to my skin as my knees hit the ground.

What does a drop see? Come the mountains, come the sea, come the torrents pouring free. Down a traveling sojourner’s fall, along a travailing laborers’ hall as the raven gently swoops leaving fate to plague, till raving, down the leaves the drop runs and…drip. Into a drib, drab, dribbling stream. Is this the end? Is the drop subsumed? No. To the end I stream. Enriched for the dull sub-current which carried me through to wealth in the present as the gift of my end; drip. I see into the sea.
I woke when a large drip landed on the lid of my eye. *The drip sees into my eye,* I thought, waking into befuddlement, or rather, the sea. No, it was a dream. I only wish I had time to say now how that vision has become the theme of my short life.

Gradually it all came back to me. The station. Her running. The trees! I started to my feet and looked bleary eyed into the entanglement of branches. It was growing dark then, so vision was becoming more valuable, but like everything, the more valuable it becomes, the more a person seems to strain, and the more strain the worse things get and the further it slips from attainment. I could see nothing. *Why didn’t I climb the tree?* I was afraid. I wasn’t afraid of climbing trees. No, I was afraid of these trees. *Why?* I didn’t believe anything had actually happened. *But where was she?* Probably just hiding from me. Or perhaps she climbed down while I was a sleep. There were a hundred plausible explanations, each much more likely than the strange explanation that seemed continually to force itself upon my mind. I had almost forgotten the light and the silence by then, but not quite. I was trying, though. I wouldn’t have said it then, but I was trying hard to forget that terrible silence. I can’t even say now why it was so important to forget that moment. Onward I pressed, my mind searching for explanations for where she could be. Yet, something in me knew that if I returned to her home or my own I would not find her. I knew she had not left. I told myself she had, but I stayed in the tree, steadily climbing higher.

My trousers caught and tore. Mother would be angry when I returned. She can’t afford to be spending time mending foolery. Soon a strange thing happened. I began to miss her. I knew she was not still in the tree. I knew she was not at home. She was gone. She was my best mate and she was gone. My mind raced through moments together. I remembered times of laughing at her foolish talk. I wished I had not laughed. I hadn’t inside. I admired her for the things she said and did, but they were strange. I wanted desperately to learn what she had tried to share with me. If only I could.

I sat down on a limb, leaned my head back against the tree, and silence engulfed me. “What was that,” I yelled. A monstrous form soared through the blue sky, covering my vision almost entirely from where I had, just a moment before, been lying on the grass.

I was standing. She was hugging me now. I don’t know how she found me. “Don’t worry. He is a protector, one of the Citorangai.”

“I followed you into the tree, and then…” I stammered. “Well, how did I get here and how did you find me?”

“Yes! You followed me into the tree. I am so glad you did. We are not in the tree; we are not in our world, yet we are not entirely absent from it as far as I can make out. It is all rather complicated, though. The answer to your second and third questions is the same: the portal brought you here, and here is where I was. When I came through the portal I was a long way from here, back in the courtyard of the fortress. It brought me there because that is where someone was who could teach me and help me. The portal, as near as I can tell, always takes care that those who travel through are where they need to be most. Right now, because this is your first time through, and because you were concerned to follow me, the portal apparently thought it best to bring you to me. I am glad you’ve come. If you are willing, I will tell you all that I know about this kingdom and the war that has been raging for ages.”

She seemed so much older than before. She appeared mature in a way that could not be measured by age. She was still childish, yet spoke with more sincerity and knowledge than comes from mere progression of years, however many may pass. She talked long as we walked. She showed me the darkened sky to the south. Now and again distant spurts of fire would flicker
across the mountain backdrop. “The Dræcs continually test our borders, always looking for a way in.”

“What keeps them out?” I inquired.

“The borders of his Kingdom,” she replied. “Oh, I was confused too at first. It is not a specific thing that keeps them out, rather the simple reality that this is the land of the King. They do not dare pass the borders unwelcome. I too wondered why they test the borders then, but soon found that they constantly find weak points and break through. This may seem paradoxical. There have been dark times in the past when the whole kingdom has appeared to be in danger of falling, but it never has.”

“How can there be a weak point if there is nothing keeping them out, but the fact that this is the realm under the rule of the king?” I asked.

“They must be let in by one of us. The Dræcs are merely the front for a deeper strategy. Oh yes, it is possible for them to succeed and gain access via our own people. Nevertheless, they serve the purpose of distracting and drawing the attention away from the subtle attacks. The Dræcs are dangerous, but they are merely the cover for a worse danger that is at work even as we speak. The Cirtorangu, which you saw when you first arrived, guard most vigilantly those areas that they sense to be the weakest and most likely to fall. They are ever ready for battle, but never first to strike.” She paused over a celadon flower.

“What now?” I loved this new world, but was growing uneasy. “And why are we walking steadily toward the border?”

“What now? We help. There is a town near the border just behind that hill over there. That is where we are headed now. Word came that it is besieged and in dire straits.”

“What if we prefer to just return home? It is growing late,” I added, but as I did so I noted the sun was nearing noon. It was still quite early.

“Well, I suppose the answer is a question. Is the choice about what we want to do, or about what we should do?”

“Oh, don’t go into all that making up of obligation to force people to do things. It comes down to what we want, and right now I want to return home. Besides, I don’t half believe all this anyway.” It was a lie. I believed it all too much and that’s what scared me.

“How do I get home?”

“You will be home soon,” she replied sadly and added, “I will miss you.”

“You’re not coming, then?”

“Not yet, I will return soon.” She said, but as she did so, her voice began to fade along with the rest of the daylight. I was in the dark, on the limb with my back to the tree.

I climbed down and went home. My mother sent me to bed without supper for tearing my trousers and for getting in late. I didn’t see her the next day, but on the following day I saw her. Her parents didn’t seem to notice that she had been gone for some days. It seems to be that way with the other world. Time passes, but people here don’t notice your absence. They pick back up with you just as if you had remained with them as normal.

“Where are you hurrying to?” I asked as I caught up with her on the path.

“Oh, hello!” she replied excitedly, but without changing her pace. “I met the man who wrote that funny book my parents were reading about the ox, or something. He’s a really nice man. He knows about the other world, but has never been to the part I was describing. He loves flowers of all types and colors. I promised to bring him back my favorite.” She held up a beautiful celadon flower. One from the field we had walked in together.
“There he is,” she said, continuing, “he walks this way to his work almost every day.” She ran ahead. I hesitated, slowed my pace, and soon found I was standing still watching from a short way off.

He was big—tall and big. He looked mean. I grew a little afraid for her. I have since come to love him and learn much from him. He smiled as she approached. She reached up her hand to his and gently handed him the flower. At that moment there was a flash. A journalist or some person with a tripod taking pictures of passersby had noticed them and caught the exchange on film.

Those few short days were the first in a series that continued to bombard my otherwise routine world. Following her through the portal was like a drop of water falling into a tank already brimming full. It was the first to drive the water over the edge. There were to be many more, but I will always remember the first drip on that rainy day that started a new life overflowing.
Lauren DelMauro  
Professor Stephen Woolsey  
Third Place

Frodo Is Not Alone

The famous song “A Little Help from My Friends” by John Lennon represents a recurring theme in *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien (“Friendship Page”). Protagonist Frodo Baggins has trustworthy and dependable friends who accompany him on his grueling journey to the evil land of Mordor. The need for Frodo’s journey to Mordor begins when Frodo’s Uncle Bilbo leaves him the evil Lord Sauron’s Ring. The wizard Gandalf tells Frodo about the true and evil power of the Ring and that Frodo has to bear the Ring. Frodo is understandably apprehensive about this quest because he is only a Hobbit from the Shire. However, he proves himself worthy by completing that quest. Frodo would not be successful without help from his skilled and powerful companions along the way. *The Lord of the Rings* series shows that Frodo could not have made it to Mordor without his friends Sam, Gandalf, and Aragorn to motivate him, provide useful skills, and help him when his task seems impossible.

Samwise Gamgee is the best and most loyal friend Frodo has. He gives Frodo continuous encouragement and a positive outlook. Sam is ordered by Gandalf to accompany Frodo and Sam has seemingly no qualms about it. He says, “Me sir! Me go and see Elves and all! Hooray!” (*Fellowship* 73). Sam goes with Frodo on his perilous journey even though Sam is not sure he will return home. He looks forward to seeing Elves and he does not think about the dangers ahead. He instead looks up to Frodo and encourages him to keep going, especially when Frodo wants to collapse under the weight of the Ring. Sam makes sure he is always by Frodo’s side. When Frodo and many others meet at Council of Elrond in Rivendell Sam is concerned about Frodo, since Frodo volunteers to take the Ring to Mordor: “But you won't send him off alone surely, Master?” cried Sam, unable to contain himself any longer, and jumping up from the corner where he had been quietly sitting on the floor. “No indeed!” said Elrond, turning towards him with a smile. “You at least shall go with him. It is hardly possible to separate you from him, even when he is summoned to a secret council and you are not.” (*Fellowship* 284) Sam cannot let Frodo go off alone. He knows how difficult Frodo’s journey will be and that he cannot possibly do it alone. Sam may not be the wisest or strongest companion but he provides friendship and motivation.

Similarly, at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring* Frodo wants to go to Mordor alone, but Sam will not let him. Sam runs to the boats as fast as his short legs can carry him. Sam is so desperate he does not even stop when he cuts his knees and almost drowns. He only yells, “Coming Mr. Frodo! Coming!” (*Fellowship* 422). Sam stops at nothing to get to Frodo. Injuries, tiredness, and drowning will not stop Sam. When Sam finally reaches Frodo, Frodo tells him he is going to Mordor alone. Sam announces, “I know that well enough, Mr. Frodo. Of course you are. And I’m coming with you” (*Fellowship* 422). Sam will never leave Frodo. Frodo’s safety and success is Sam’s primary concern (“Sam Gamgee”).

Sam also protects Frodo when new characters are introduced. Sam makes sure they are trustworthy. At the Prancing Pony Inn in Bree, Sam, Frodo, Merry, and Pippin spot in the corner of the inn the tattered man called Strider. Sam is suspicious of him, even though he is a friend of Gandalf’s. Sam interrogates him to make sure he is telling the truth: Sam was not daunted, and he still eyed Strider dubiously. “How do we know you are the Strider that Gandalf speaks about?” he demanded. “You never mentioned
Gandalf, till this letter came out. You might be a play-acting spy, for all I can see, trying to get us to go with you. You might have done in the real Strider and took his clothes. What have you to say to that?” (Fellowship 183)

Sam takes necessary precautions. Strider could be an imposter or a liar so Sam feels that he should protect Frodo from him. Sam finally trusts Strider when he tells Sam that if he was a spy he could have killed them all by now. Sam not only protects and cares for Frodo in The Fellowship of the Ring, but in the following books as well.

In the next two books of the trilogy Sam helps Frodo by discerning that Gollum is not trustworthy. He does not trust Gollum, even though Frodo does. Gollum is a deceitful, loathsome creature who secretly tries to steal the Ring from Frodo. Unfortunately, Frodo does not believe Sam; Frodo sees the good in people, especially after Gandalf tells him he should not judge Gollum. In The Two Towers Sam correctly says Gollum is a “sneak” when he is creeping around Frodo while he sleeps. Sam catches him and tells him to stop. However, Frodo trusts Gollum no matter what Sam tells him. Frodo follows Gollum anywhere, even into a mysterious, dark tunnel. It turns out to be the lair of a huge spider named Shelob. Sam bravely tells Frodo to use his phial of light from the Lady Galadriel, but it only works briefly. Sam and Frodo are attacked by Shelob and Frodo is knocked unconscious by her. Sam fights Shelob until she crawls away in defeat. Afterwards Sam thinks Frodo is dead and he says, “Don’t leave me here alone! It’s your Sam calling. Don’t go where I can’t follow! Wake up, Mr. Frodo!” (Two Towers 431).

Throughout the whole ordeal Sam is very worried about Frodo, especially because Orcs come and take him. Since he thinks Frodo is dead he takes the Ring from him to make sure no one else can. Because of Frodo’s unrelenting trust in Gollum he is almost led to his death. However, Sam is Frodo’s hero in The Return of the King when he finds where the Orcs take Frodo and he rescues him. The protection of Frodo is Sam’s job. He has to be sure that others are trustworthy and will not hurt Frodo.

Sam is not only Frodo’s protector, but also his caretaker. It is Frodo’s responsibility to carry the Ring but it is often Sam’s responsibility to carry Frodo. Sam’s concern for Frodo is especially evident when Frodo is pierced by the Morgul-knife of the Black Rider on Weathertop. Sam is very worried about Frodo and he urges the Elf-lord Glorfindel to save him by bringing him to Rivendell. Sam says, “My master is sick and wounded. He can’t go on riding after nightfall. He needs rest” (Fellowship 223). Later in Rivendell, Sam rarely leaves his master’s side. Frodo’s welfare is Sam’s primary interest. When Frodo is overwhelmed by the Ring’s burden or weak from hunger and walking Sam allows him rest, more so than Sam himself rests. In The Two Towers Sam is constantly worried about Frodo. On the long and difficult journey to Mordor Frodo feels more and more weary. Sam “put[s] Frodo in front of him…, and [keeps] a watchful eye on every movement of his, supporting him if he [stumbles], and trying to encourage him with clumsy words” (Two Towers 301). Sam not only watches Frodo carefully but he also makes sure he is well fed; Frodo needs good strength and health, especially because of the Ring’s pressure. Sam’s good heart and selflessness helps Frodo persevere.

Sam is not the only character who is an aid to Frodo’s quest. Gandalf the Grey is also crucial to Frodo’s task. Gandalf is Frodo’s guide and fount of knowledge along the way. He helps Frodo by giving him wisdom, strength, and courage. In the beginning of the book Gandalf explains to Frodo about the evil of the Ring and what Frodo must do. Frodo says, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.” Gandalf tells him sadly, “So do I and so do all who live to see such times. But it is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us” (Fellowship 60). Frodo has to follow his destiny, even if he thinks he is too young or
weak. The intelligence and strength Frodo has will have to do. Gandalf does what needs to be done by showing Frodo the arduous fate set before him.

Later, Gandalf gives Frodo additional wisdom about his task. This is apparent when Frodo complains: “I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?” (Fellowship 70). Frodo cannot fathom why a small hobbit like himself is entrusted with a seemingly impossible task. Gandalf tries to assuage him with truthful motivation: “Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have” (Fellowship 70). Frodo may not be very strong or skilled but he has some strength and intelligence. He must be prepared for the road ahead of him. Although Frodo has a good chance of dying he must try to succeed. Gandalf tells Frodo the truth to compel him forward in spite of the tough mission.

Also along the lines of wisdom is the advice Gandalf gives about judgment. Gandalf wants Frodo to be fair in his judgments of others. People Frodo meets along the way could have a part to play in his journey so he needs to be respectful. Nonetheless, Frodo is quick to deal out opinions of others, especially to Gollum. Gollum owns the Ring for many years but finally loses it to Bilbo Baggins, Frodo’s uncle. Gollum is a wretched, deformed creature who is forever tied to the Ring. Frodo thinks Gollum deserves death for his horrible acts and greed concerning the Ring. Frodo says, “What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance” (Fellowship 68). Gandalf reprimands Frodo for his harsh words: “Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends” (Fellowship 69). Gollum may have acted wickedly but that does not mean he deserves to die. Gandalf wants Frodo to forgive Gollum because he cannot help the power the Ring has over him. Soon Frodo will also know that terrible power of the Ring. Gandalf tries to help Frodo become more understanding to others’ situations.

Another part that shows Frodo he needs to treat Gollum with integrity is when Gandalf talks about Gollum’s future with the Ring. Gandalf feels that Gollum “has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end” (Fellowship 69). Gollum lives for the Ring and will not give it up without a fight. Gandalf’s instruction to Frodo to be nice is necessary in the second book, The Two Towers. Gollum joins Frodo and Sam on the road to Mordor and continues with them until the end of the book. Gollum appears happy to guide Frodo to Mordor. Frodo trusts Gollum’s guidance and ideas, and trusts Gollum when he says “this is the only way,” although he later leads Frodo to Shelob’s tunnel (Two Towers 394). Frodo respects Gandalf’s advice by treating Gollum kindly, even when Sam knows Gollum is a deceitful liar. Gandalf’s advice comes in use again when Gollum returns in the end of The Return of the King to prevent Frodo from destroying his “precious” Ring. It is actually Gollum who destroys the Ring, not Frodo. Gollum is so desperate for the Ring that he falls into the fires of Mount Doom. After the Ring is destroyed Frodo says to Sam, “But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him!” (Return 277). Without Frodo’s kindness toward Gollum he could not have made it to Mordor nor would the Ring be destroyed. Gandalf’s wisdom is the cause of Frodo’s open-mindedness and successful journey.

Gandalf lends not only his wisdom and moral guidance to Frodo, but also his intelligence. Gandalf gives Frodo much needed aid because of his knowledge as a wizard. Gandalf cannot take the burden of the Ring from Frodo but he assists in other ways. Gandalf knows he is too powerful for the Ring and would use it for evil purposes. Gandalf says: “And
over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly” (*Fellowship* 71). Instead, Gandalf tells Frodo the way to Mordor and gives him Sam as a companion. He informs him about the Ring’s influence: “whatever it may do, it will be slow, slow to evil, if you keep it with that purpose” (*Fellowship* 71). Other than Sam, Gandalf thinks that Saruman could be helpful to Frodo’s cause. Gandalf asks him to help but he sides with the enemy Sauron. Gandalf has to escape from Saruman, but he arrives safely in Rivendell so he can continue helping Frodo. Gandalf’s great knowledge of Middle-earth is a vital aid to Frodo.

Gandalf has not only knowledge, but also strength and courage. When he joins the fellowship that brings the Ring to Mordor he is a powerful help. Frodo especially benefits from Gandalf’s power in the Mines of Moria. Gandalf leads the group through the Mines, despite Orcs and other obstacles. At the Bridge of Khazad Dûm Gandalf protects the fellowship from the fiery Balrog, a symbol of ancient evil, and shouts, “You cannot pass!” (*Fellowship* 345). The Balrog drags Gandalf into the shadowy abyss. Gandalf fights boldly to his apparent death to let Frodo continue to Mordor. If he had not fought the Balrog, others could have died too. Even though Frodo needs Gandalf’s knowledge and power, Gandalf’s sacrifice was necessary for the group’s safety. Thankfully in *The Two Towers* Gandalf returns, clearly alive. He is now Gandalf the White, greater and more powerful than before. His aid continues in the end of *The Return of the King* when he gives his power and wisdom to some men fighting against Sauron’s armies. He readies them for battle with encouragement and bravery:

> We must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For, my lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so that even if Barad-dur be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age. But this, I deem, is our duty. And better so than to perish nonetheless—as we surely shall, if we sit here—and know as we die that no new age shall be. (*Return* 191-92)

Gandalf’s bravery and strength is evident because of his leadership in battles (“Gandalf”). At the end of *The Return of the King* he further shows his power by bringing eagles to rescue Sam and Frodo from the crumbling Eye on Mount Doom. Gandalf helps Frodo by fighting battles against the enemy and using his power to save him. Gandalf is an important help to Frodo because of his strength, protection, and bravery.

Aragorn, or Strider, is another character who aids Frodo. He tries to guide the hobbits to Mordor, though they only make it to Rivendell. When Aragorn is introduced in the Prancing Pony, Frodo and Sam are not sure they can trust him. The Barman tells Frodo that Aragorn is “one of the wandering folk—Rangers we call them” (*Fellowship* 169). However, when Aragorn’s trustworthiness is proven through a letter from Gandalf the hobbits add Aragorn as a member of their group. That night brings danger from the Black Riders and Aragorn helps the hobbits by setting a trap for the Black Riders. His ruse is successful and he and the hobbits set out for their expedition to Mordor. Strider promises: “if by life or death I can save you, I will” (*Fellowship* 183). The protection of the hobbits is only the beginning of Aragorn’s guidance.

Aragorn contributes other advantages to the journey by knowing how to track people and creatures, which helps the group move more quickly. He also knows when danger is close at hand. He says, “I have quick ears, and though I cannot disappear, I have hunted many wild and wary things and I can usually avoid being seen, if I wish” (*Fellowship* 175-76). These skills of Aragorn’s are useful when the group travels through rivers and lands, especially from the River Bruinen to Weathertop. The group meets cruel guests at Weathertop and Aragorn must defend the hobbits when five Black Riders attack. Aragorn does a respectable job protecting them, but
he is unable to stop Frodo from being stabbed by a Morgul-knife. Aragorn says, “Don’t despair! You must trust me now. Your Frodo is made of sterner stuff than I had guessed…. I will do all I can to help and heal him” (Fellowship 210). Afterwards Aragorn attempts to heal Frodo’s wound, but it is impossible without magical means. Frodo is eventually brought to safety in Rivendell by the Elf-lord Glorfindel. Aragorn tries his best to lead and protect the hobbits.

Besides being a guide to the hobbits, Aragorn assists through war efforts. Frodo is on his quest with only Sam but Aragorn helps in the next two books by fighting against the forces of Saruman and Sauron. In the final battle against Sauron’s forces he calls the ghosts out of the mountains to repay a debt to him as the King of Gondor. The ghosts come to help and afterwards Legolas says: “none of the enemy were left to resist us; all were drowned” or flew South (Return 186). Aragorn is so powerful that “not for naught does Mordor fear him. But nobler is his spirit than the understanding of Sauron” (Return 186-87). Even Mordor is afraid of Aragorn’s strength. He is not only powerful but has something Sauron does not: honor. Aragorn never ceases helping Frodo through his strength and nobility. Even though he is not traveling with Frodo, he aids him by making his journey easier.

Frodo’s companions each give him distinct and essential aid. Sam, Gandalf, and Aragorn contribute to Frodo’s task through guidance, wisdom, strength, and courage. Sam’s protection, compassion, and uplifting spirit were Frodo’s aid throughout the trilogy. Gandalf played an equally important, but different role. Gandalf’s insight, leadership, bravery, and strength help Frodo to make good decisions, to trust the right people, and to bring him successfully to Mordor. Without Gandalf’s guidance before leaving the Shire, Frodo would not have known what to do. Lastly, Aragorn aids Frodo in a similar way as Gandalf. He gives Frodo wisdom, protection, and guidance. Also, Aragorn’s effort in battles helps Frodo complete his task. Frodo has steadfast friends to guide him and keep him company on his perilous quest.

Works Cited


