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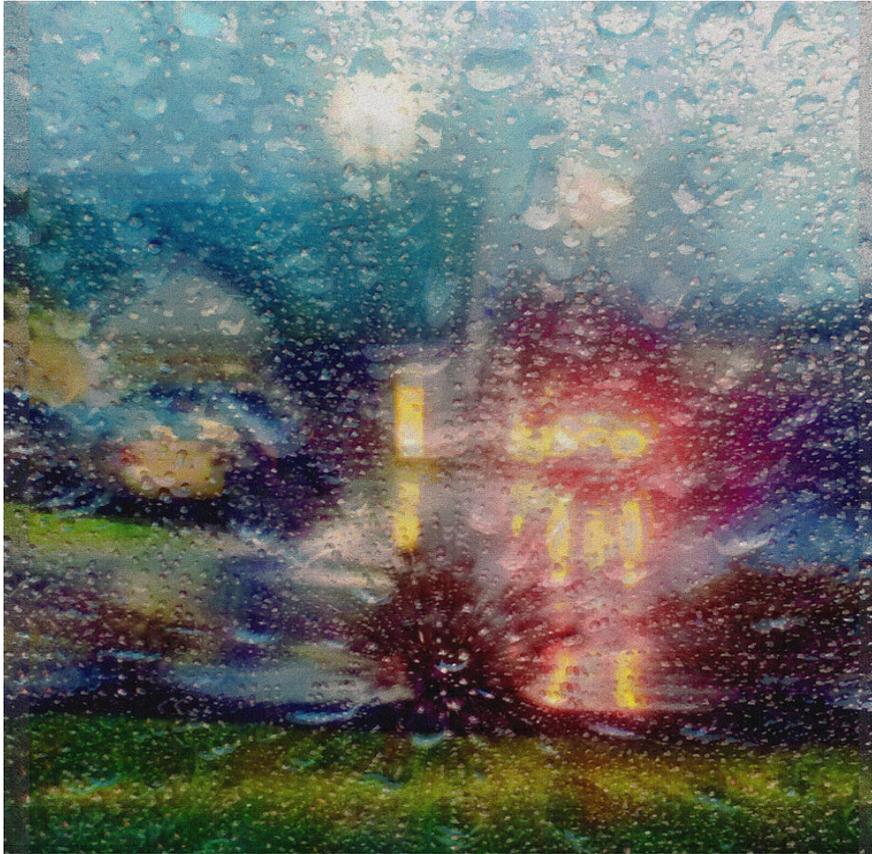
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The Pulchritudinous Cardinal

Alison Pelkonen



I never read the newspaper. March was a different time for the United States, a time of hope and ignorance. Everyone hated our economics class. My snooze-worthy teacher made us read the newspaper every day. Kids colored in the words “COVID-19,” while others admired the beautiful architecture of the moldy ceiling. I decided to listen to the

man standing at the front of the tiny well-lit classroom. China and Italy were experiencing death after death. Just some numbers in the newspaper, increasing exponentially day after day. My mind wandered. This one thought has been replaying on a loop since April. Those numbers are people, siblings, parents, sons, and daughters. The thought creeped in:

“That would never happen to me.” No way could the United States come under attack to that degree. It’s ridiculous to even let my mind wander to that place. Nothing that bad could ever happen to me.

My nanny and papa were married when they were teenagers. My nanny was only nineteen when she first became pregnant. I always felt the love they had for each other. Strolling into the same room, their unconditional love made you feel safe. Papa’s constant demand to see wrinkles forming in the sides of anyone’s mouth as they try to control their laughter. Nanny, shouting his name from across the room, “BABE!” It was a special type of love. Even in his old age, he would do anything for her. He was trying to grasp her medicine, standing on a rusty chair that could have been from the 1950s, when the unforgivable chair wobbled and knocked him off. My papa, the strongest, brightest soul broke his hip while the pandemic was at its worst.

Numbers in the newspaper climbed, faster than anyone anticipated. My papa, a healthy man, was caught in the hospital at the wrong time. “He died,” my mom announced with a stone-cold look. Emotionless. I could tell she was broken, in shock because this wasn’t supposed to happen. Not to us. My stomach dropped to my feet. My mind and my heart began to race, seeing which one could comprehend the two words that had just floated above my head. Spinning with confusion, I closed my door, slowly. My bright green room didn’t look as vibrant as it just had. I heard my nanny downstairs. With the dementia kicking in, she was more disoriented than my mother and me.

I chose to run. If I drive fast enough,

the problems I left at home won’t be able to catch up with me. My normal emotionless state began to intensify until it broke me. *Does my sister know? Why did I just leave? Should I have stayed and comforted my mom who just lost her dad?* Selfishness overflowed my eyes. I needed to leave. I needed to understand how someone I knew, someone I loved, contracted a virus that I never thought could affect me. This wasn’t supposed to be real life; those were just numbers. My naive mind couldn’t understand the heartbreak that was going to occur within the next five minutes. The world spun around me while I had experienced what all those other people did before me, what my class was too ignorant to read about. My steering wheel was now soaking wet with regret—regret for the way I thought two months ago. The fog forming on the glass of my car felt like the truth setting in. There was no escape. Rapidly realizations of the minutes prior entered my dingy Subaru, Stanley.

Collapsed within my once carefree high school parking lot, a place uninhabited since March, I allowed myself to implode. I felt every emotion: anger, disgust, regret, sorrow, hopelessness, and pain. I have never cried with so much suffering before. I began to abuse Stanley, bashing in his steering wheel. I screamed bloody murder, over and over and over until I ran out of breath, and all you could see was pure pain on my ghostly muted face with inflamed bloodshot eyes.

Matt is my closest friend and has been since I was eleven. He was the only one who knew he was in the hospital. All I could think to do was pick up the blurry phone and click his name. I repeated the same words my mother said to me minutes ago, “He died.”

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Matt could hear the heartbreak in my voice, cracking while trying to catch my breath. The only person who could make me happy during any situation knew it was impossible to take away my pain.

Selfishly, I interrogated him. “Do I tell my friends? I didn’t even tell them he had it. What do I say? Please, help me. I don’t know what to do. I can’t go home. I can’t go home. Please, help me!” I barely let him get a word in.

After sitting in my lifeless high school parking lot for over an hour, Stanley and I returned home. The front door that once brought me warmth opened while I carefully stepped past the mat, taking in my last breath of solitude before being swallowed by the woeful cloud forming in my kitchen. My nanny was in shambles. The wooden stairs creaked as my feet quickly rushed up them before anyone could see my bloodshot eyes and swollen soaked face. It’s mentally draining for someone who rarely knows what year it is to comprehend COVID-19. I crumpled onto my scratched up floor with my ear to the door, listening to my nanny scream. The agony in her voice made me sick.

“How did your father get sick? Since I’ve known him, he has never even gotten the flu. He’s strong. How did he get sick in the hospital? The hospital killed him. They killed him. The hospital killed him. I’m going to sue them. They killed him!” She might have been confused, but she wasn’t wrong. They killed him. They killed my papa, and there was nothing that we could do about it.

My mother and I are replicas of each other. We don’t allow others to see us in pain. It was an unspoken rule. Now more than ever, we had to uphold. We did it for Nanny.

Around her, there was no reason to bring up the fact that he was dead. It was over. He wasn’t coming home. So we didn’t bring it up. I took everything I was feeling and forced it down my throat until I felt nothing. I went numb.

“We are going to be late, Alison. Hurry up!” For the past two never-ending weeks, my mom was on edge. My nanny threw on her black coat. “Don’t forget the black masks,” she called. It was awkward. The tragic mask served as a constant reminder of just how my papa died. The neighbors watched the humble procession slowly make its way out. We admired the hearse as it pulled away from the house. I recorded the whole thing: my papa passing his childhood home and then his home away from home, and his work, North Shore Collision Corporation, for the last time.

We pulled into Saint Mary’s, and all I could think about was the horror that those families were about to go through. It still disgusts me. Only a small amount of family was allowed to watch my papa get put in the ground. I hadn’t hugged anyone for over a month. Locking eyes with my cousins, the rules of social distancing vanished. I ran over and wrapped my arms so tightly around them, they had to pry me off. This wasn’t the family reunion I had hoped for, but it was the closest thing to it. Nestled in the arms of loved ones, my scrunched mask caught my tears. The least agonizing part of burying my papa was when we threw in the roses. Amidst the clouds, a ray of sun beamed down into his coffin. I’m not sure anyone else noticed, but as the flowers fell to him, I knew he was warm. Some flowers missed the coffin and rested on the grass beside, but

I threw mine with perfect aim, a perfect arc. I’ve played basketball since I was ten. Every time I saw my papa, he would ask me, “How many baskets have you made?” and “When’s your next game?” He loved talking to me about it. We used to practice shooting in the family room together with invisible balls, invisible nets, and laughter.

One of the last times I saw my papa was at my basketball game. He watched me play intently. I played well that game and I could tell he was proud. He told my mom that he wanted to see me play again. So with perfection, I lobbed my rose in his grave. I knew he was watching.

None of us had closure. COVID-19 changed every aspect of my life, both good and bad. My mother and I never fully got over his death. Instead of accepting that this was our life, we chose to talk to a medium. I don’t necessarily believe in mediums, but when you’re desperate for answers you’ll believe anything that bears hope.

Sitting in my freshly saged room, I reluctantly hopped on Zoom with a long-nailed lady wearing a colorful, beaded necklace who was supposed to tell me everything I needed to hear. Through her, my papa told me things that made me feel safe again. Things that made me laugh again. She said he will always be with me. She said a pulchritudinous, bright red cardinal would come

singing to get our attention. She said it would be him sending the bird to help us heal. Each day, I saw the cardinal. My papa made me fall in love with cardinals.

It’s not possible for anyone to understand how much pain someone who lost a loved one to COVID-19 carries every day. I went through each day suffering in silence, constantly alone with only my thoughts. I never told anyone that I lost someone to COVID. They’d only pity me. “I’m so sorry for your loss.” I’ve heard it enough.

In the months following his death, I crawled back into a shell. I just wanted to be alone. The only place I’d put my pain was in a tan journal, decorated with stars. It was always there for me as I sobbed into the pages, documenting my days. It became like a friend. A best friend. Though as time went on, I slowly pushed it away. My journal had been there for me, but I had grown stronger. I was evolving into someone I always wanted to be, someone who stopped judging those around them for the way they acted. My ignorance grew into the accepting body of a beautiful cardinal. I was full of knowledge, empathy, hope, and love. I can honestly say I’ve never been more grateful for the pain I had to endure. Now I can fly free, knowing the days are only getting brighter. Even when you’re in pain, life doesn’t stop.



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