



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

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Year 2013

Article 6

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1-1-2013

## A Clean Slate

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Class of 2015

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O'Grady, Meghan E. (2013) "A Clean Slate," *The Mercury*: Year 2013, Article 6.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2013/iss1/6>

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## A Clean Slate

### **Author Bio**

Meghan is a sophomore French major from Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. She likes traveling, baking, and long walks on the beach. Her favorite novel is *The Scorpio Races* by Maggie Stiefvater.

# A Clean Slate

Meghan O'Grady

Everyone knows who I am. They wish they didn't. But they all know. My face was plastered across every front page, every television screen.

"Teen Girl Kills Best Friend."

It's a lie. And they know it's a lie now, but it's too late for me. Everyone gets their fifteen minutes of fame. There's the "Star Wars Kid" and the "Talking Twins" and the "Laughing Baby." And now there is the "Teen Girl Who Killed Her Best Friend." And that is all I will ever be.

They found me innocent. Twelve people who had never seen me before believed me when I told them I loved her more than I loved my own life. I want to tell everyone who looks at me that way that I was found innocent. Those are the rules—I went to court and I was innocent until proven guilty, and they couldn't prove anything.

I told my parents I wanted to return to school and have things go back to normal. Like that was ever going to happen. So now I spend most of the day hiding in the art wing. I don't really paint, but I sit in front of a canvas and hold a paintbrush. If anyone walks past, they only glance. They can't see my face from the doorway and they just assume I'm an artist. No one asks questions. I've noticed that about people. They like things nice and simple. Girl + art room = artist. Girl + courtroom = killer.

"Hey," someone says. I turn to look at the boy standing in the doorway but I don't say anything. I don't know what to say. No one has ever come in here before. "What are you doing here?"

It takes me longer than it should to come up with an answer. No one has ever bothered to ask me what I was doing. No one has ever bothered to ask me anything. I wave my hand toward the canvas. "Painting. Duh."

He laughs quickly, in a way that isn't really a laugh, and puts his backpack on the ground before walking toward me. "I doubt it," he says.

"Yeah? Why's that? You think the killer girl can't get any enjoyment out of art?" I snap. It's easier to be rude than to be polite. People expect you to be rude when you're a killer. They expect you to have no respect for authority, to cut class, to wear all black, and to dye your hair. I'm just trying to make things easier for them.

I learned once in psychology that when people are very young, they create little folders in their brains called schemas. They learn the charac-

teristics of a table and make a folder for it so that every time they see a piece of furniture, they can analyze its characteristics and decide whether it belongs in the table folder or not. This all happens in milliseconds. When presented with something they've never seen before, people don't know how to categorize it. Their brains freeze up. They keep searching through their folders to find one that fits the characteristics they see, but they can't find it. This makes them uncomfortable. I don't fit into most people's schemas. I don't belong with their idea of a killer. I used to try to prove them wrong, to be the exact opposite of a killer, but it only made them more confused. I'm doing them a favor this way.

The boy laughs again, but this time it's a proper laugh. He's actually amused. My heart starts to speed up, and I'm not sure why, but suddenly I'm scared. He's laughing. Why is he laughing?

"I didn't say that. But I doubt you're painting that picture."

"Why?" I demand, and this time I stand up and cross my arms. When I raise my voice at other people, they cower and start to apologize or run away. They are scared that the killer girl is going to snap and kill them like she killed Jessica.

"Because it's mine."

He takes the paintbrush out of my hand. The clean, dry paintbrush. I don't know what to say to him. I need a comeback. I need to say something. "Oh..." He laughs at me again and now I really am angry. I push past him and grab my backpack. I need to go to Chemistry anyway. Playing hooky is one thing, but failing a class and having to repeat a grade would be unbearable.

"Do you like it?" he asks as I leave the room, but I don't answer him. Idiot. I'm an idiot. Of course it was someone's painting. It's always someone's painting. Did I think it just magically changed overnight while I wasn't there?

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My mom hung the rainbow Christmas lights on my wall. She said the room needed cheering up, but it wasn't the room she was trying to make smile. At night, with all of the other lights turned off, the red bulbs overpower the other colors and the whole room is lit with a hazy red glow. Like hell. Like the dress Jessica wore to soph hop. Like blood.

That night, I lie in my bed and, for the first time in months, I don't think about blood. I don't think about the pictures they shoved under my nose, telling me to look at them, look at them, see what you did. Instead, I think about the boy. I think about feeling like an idiot and saying nothing. If you say nothing in court, they think you're guilty. If you say you're

innocent, they think you're guilty too. Really, there's no winning. Not really. Even when they let you go, everyone thinks you're guilty. Your best friend's parents look at you like they've never seen you before. But I don't think about that tonight. I think about needing a comeback. I used to love to banter, but I've gotten so out of practice it takes me two hours to finally come up with a clever response.

The next day, I walk to the art room, but he isn't there. Of course not—I spent three weeks there and never saw him. His free period must coincide with my chemistry class. I really shouldn't miss chem again, but I can't let him think he got to me. I can't let him know that I hide in front of his painting and stare at it and wish I could disappear into that landscape and never return.

I wait in the art room until he comes in.

"You again," he says, and he smiles like we're friends. He should know better. My friends end up dead.

I open my mouth to spin my clever excuse, but before I can start to speak he says, "You never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Do you like it?" He jerks his head toward the painting, and for a second I am tempted to leave again, or else tell him it's terrible. But I don't. I stand in front of it and really study it: the branches, the color of the leaves on the ground, the shadows.

"It needs a person," I tell him finally. Me. It needs me, hidden from prying eyes in the shadows of the trees. No one would bother me there. No one would expect anything from me. They wouldn't think they know me just because they read a newspaper article about me ages ago.

"It's supposed to be a landscape," he says.

I shrug. I don't care what he thinks of my critique. If I care about what everyone thinks of me, I'll go insane.

"Am I supposed to paint you?" he asks.

I shake my head and head for the door. He doesn't get it.

"Wait, I'm sorry. That was rude. Thanks for telling me. Most people just say it's good and move on."

"I'm not most people. I'm sure you know that."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

We stay there, motionless. I don't want to ask him his name, but I know I can't keep calling him "boy" in my head. After a few moments, he solves the problem for me by saying, "I'm James, by the way."

I open my mouth to tell him I'm Emma, but realize I don't have to. I try to find a response, but nothing comes to mind. Finally I say, "I need to go to class."

He nods. And just like yesterday, he calls me as I'm leaving the

room. "I'll be here after school. If you're interested."

I am. Of course I am. But it takes me the rest of the day to decide whether or not I'm going to go. In the end, I do, but only because going home and pretending I've had a good day at school seems like too much effort. Also, I want to see if he's taken my advice. He hasn't.

"You came back."

I shrug like it isn't a big deal. *Yeah, so?* It becomes a routine, sitting in the art room with him, watching as he adds detail and highlights to his forest. For the first few days, we don't speak much, but that soon changes.

"So my teacher told me this looks too much like a postcard. What does that even mean?" he asks me one day, staring critically at his landscape. He doesn't sound too upset about it. I don't look up from my math homework, but I reply anyway.

"I'm not the artist. Maybe you should make the sky red or something." He laughs. I don't know why he finds everything I say so amusing, but it's sort of nice to spend time with someone who isn't afraid to be alone in the same room with me.

The door opens, letting in the sounds of the hallway. James and I both look up, startled. No one has ever come in here during lunch before. A girl I recognize but don't actually know walks in, her eyes entirely focused on James and her mouth open to talk before she's even fully in the room.

"Hey, James, have you seen the—" She stops suddenly when she catches sight of me. She stares at me, then at James, then back again, completely unable to comprehend what she is seeing.

"Seen what?" he prompts her. I glare at her until she pulls her gaze away from me.

"Nothing, never mind. It's not important."

She turns to leave but I call her back in. I am so sick of everyone running away from me. "Don't leave on my account. Go on, ask him. I'm not stopping you." She mouths an incoherent sentence and flees. I watch her go, out the door, down the hallway, speedily walking away. Of course. What did I expect? Just because James talks to me when we're alone in the art room doesn't mean I've suddenly become normal. From behind me, I hear him sigh softly.

"I'm sorry. Look, don't worry about her, okay? Who cares, right?"

Right. Who cares what they think? I can't bring myself to turn around and settle back down in my seat. James comes to stand behind me, and puts his hand on my shoulder so gently I can barely feel it, like he isn't sure he should be touching me. Apart from my parents, no one has dared to touch me since the trial.

"I didn't kill her," I say finally, after the silence has gone on for too

long.

“I never said you did.”

He hadn't. But I don't know why. I step away from him and sit down on one of the stools. He doesn't start painting again.

I can't stop thinking about the trial. They told me she was dead and accused me all in one breath. I never got to mourn her. My lawyer kept telling me, “Focus, Emma. We need to convince them you're innocent. We need a strategy.” How could I focus? My best friend was dead. She's dead. There will be no more laughter, no more sleepovers. No late night texts about homework or morning talks about our favorite TV shows.

I don't look at him. I can't. I stare at the paints on the table. I'm overcome with a powerful desire to grab the red paint and smear it over his landscape. To spread it over my skin and stain my clothes with it, with red, with Jessica's blood. It's a stupid thought. A crazy thought. But knowing that doesn't make it any easier to ignore.

“Look,” he says, almost too loudly. “I'm finished.” He grabs his easel and pulls it closer to me. I look. The landscape is beautiful. He's added highlighting to the trees. The sunlight cuts through the dark shadows and makes the tips of the branches glow.

“You didn't listen to my advice,” I say, so I don't have to tell him that it makes me want to cry.

“Yes, I did.”

I look again, but there is no one in the woods that I can see. “Then where's the girl?”

He is quiet for a moment. “She's hiding. She's too scared to come out.” Suddenly, I don't think we're talking about the picture anymore. I don't know what to say to his reply, and I'm really not in the mood to talk about my inner feelings, so I deflect.

“That's a cop-out if I ever heard one.”

He laughs.

“But really, though,” I tell him, and I try to make my voice sound sincere, “it's good.”

He smiles. “Thanks. I think I'll enter it into the competition.”

“What if I'd said it was terrible?”

He laughs, and then suddenly his face gets serious. “That's my favorite thing about canvas. You can make as many mistakes as you want, completely ruin it, and then you can repaint it and start again, and it's like none of it ever happened.”

Now I know he's trying to tell me something. He takes the brush and paints a white line down my arm.

“People aren't like that,” I tell him.

He sighs. “No, they are not. That's why I'm a painter and not a psy-

chologist.”

The paint feels good at first, but as it dries it becomes itchy and starts to flake off. “I should go to class,” I say finally. He looks up and nods.

“Thanks for trying,” I offer, since I can’t say anything else.

When I’m at the door, he calls me back again. I think he likes the drama of almost letting me go, only to catch me before I do. “Emma? You know, sometimes, if the colors are dark, the canvas needs a second coat before you can paint on it again.”

We look at each other for a moment. I smile slightly, and the gesture feels both strange and familiar. “See you tomorrow.”