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Calloused

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Calloused

Author Bio

Hannah Crowley is a Junior at Gettysburg College studying English with a Writing Concentration and Classics. Reading and writing are her favorite hobbies and a way for her to connect with others. She hopes to work in publishing and one day be able to share her own novels with the world.

Calloused

HANNAH CROWLEY

“*Well I’m a long tall Texan, I ride a big white horse,*” Mimi sang. My grandfather, Deedah, sat at the piano with me on the bench beside him, and echoed: “*He rides from Texas on a big white horse.*” His weathered fingers flew along the keys of the reddish-brown, wooden spinet piano, an instrument that has always been a part of my environment and, in a sense, my family. It doesn’t have a name, it can’t think or act on its own, yet it holds photographs of our relatives all along the top and helps us share emotions where words cannot. Deedah cannot read sheet music; instead, the piano pulls it out from within him, from his heart to his fingertips to our ears. “*Well I’m a long tall Texan...*”

My family always plays music. Deedah jumps on the piano almost every night to play an old tune whether people are listening or not, and yet every time we sing together it is new and exciting. I was only five or six as I bounced to the beat beside Deedah, but I already understood and appreciated the tradition that comes with my family’s music. Despite the autumn Massachusetts breeze drifting in through the window, I felt warm and cheery in our home as the melodies of my grandparents wrapped around and hugged me, making me laugh when my grandmother smiled over at me.

By the time the moon was high that night, my young body was exhausted, and my dad took me upstairs to bed. I was being a difficult child, whining and flopping around as I wanted to stay up like the adults, so Dad decided on a lullaby to help put me to sleep; he chose “Thunder Road” by Bruce Springsteen. To this day, I still have the memory of how my imagination created images as my father sang, “*The screen door slams, Mary’s dress sways*” and “*There were ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away. They haunt this dusty beach road.*” In my mind, a woman in a white dress stood on an unpainted, wooden porch, the wind blowing her hair in a humid heat. Literal ghosts floated in the pupils of a man driving down a dark desert road. As my dad sang, the lyrics of Springsteen caused my dreams to seep into my reality as I slowly drifted into sleep. Before I took my last conscious breaths, I couldn’t help but think, I hope I don’t forget this. To

this day I have not.

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Third grade brought me the first opportunity to emulate my grandfather's talents: I decided to pursue the flute. When my music teacher played it, the sound reminded me of bluebirds, fairies, and magic. I felt it brush across my cheek and swirl around me, reminding me of Barbie movies and the theme "Hymn to the Sea" from *Titanic*. The first time I was able to make the sound of a foghorn on the mouthpiece in the school band, the fire was only further ignited.

Scales, sharps, and sheet music soon took over my life, linked in every fiber of me. Each song I learned triggered my senses and painted scenes across my mind, images of storms, romance, and battles. Being able to create something from my own hard work was enchanting, and recreating gorgeous melodies made me feel a part of something bigger than myself, something spiritual and historic. I was following in the footsteps of so many artisans before me, and could only hope to contribute to their legacies. While my relationship with God was unstable, I was certain the flute was what angels sounded like.

I continued with my flute by my side for the next eight years, eventually leading the jazz band, playing in musical ensembles, and helping run the music honors society in high school. At times it felt like a chore, like when I would get frustrated if my fingers didn't do what I told them (if I have to go over this riff one more time I swear...). But this didn't stop me from continuing on and filling myself with music.

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Okay, you just have to tell her, my soon to be thirteen—year—old self thought as I stood in the kitchen. Mom suggested makeup lessons as a birthday gift this year, as I was becoming a mature young adult in just a few days. But, I had other ideas. While my dream career just a few months before was a baker, I was now determined to become a professional musician, a singer-songwriter composing powerful music to tug at the hearts of the masses. I convinced myself that the one way to break into this career and set myself apart from others would be to learn something new: the guitar. This would make me seem more gifted, more qualified for this kind of stardom. This would make me stand out. Cause no other famous musicians play the guitar, right?

It's not that big of a deal, right? I know it's expensive, but it's what I really want, and it'll help make me a mark. As soon as I saw my mom's car pulled into the driveway, I was standing by the front door, bouncing on my tip—toes in anticipation of her response. She walked through the door, arms overflowing with groceries, as I blurted out in one hardly intelligible sentence, “Mom you know how I said I wanted makeup lessons for my thirteenth birthday well I changed my mind I don't want to take guitar lessons please.”

She stared at me for a moment, recovering from my word vomit, and just said, “Okay?”

The next week I stood before a small brick building, “Marblehead School of Music” written in gold letters across the front, with my grandfather's acoustic guitar from the Air Force, still smelling like gasoline, in my hand.

“I'm Adam!” the man with the bun and finger tattoos told me. “I'm gonna be your guitar teacher,” he said with a grin. I tried to smile back, but I think my anxiety twisted it into more of a grimace. I was unsure of myself; this was the first time I had learned a new instrument in three years, my first string instrument ever. Starting middle school that year had brought with it new insecurities. Suddenly, I was concerned with what set me apart from the pack. Where others began excelling in certain areas, whether that was math, art, or social interactions, I coasted by in the background. Sure, I was a flutist, but what once came second nature to me suddenly required more practice as the music became more challenging. Some kids in the band could master a piece in a matter of days, but for me, I needed more time. What if this one didn't come as naturally to me as the flute once did? Maybe I'm just going to make a fool out of myself.

Throughout the lesson, my focus shifted constantly from the zebra carpet to the Bob Marley poster to his encouraging smile. I was shaking as he instructed me how to place my fingers on the worn strings to form my first chord.

“Now, I'm not going to tell you what to play. We'll play what you want and jam out together. What do you want to play?” I had to think about it for a moment, what kind of a performer I wanted to be. Memories came flooding back to me; I thought of the moments of seeing my grandfather sing and play ballads to himself. I saw myself on stage in the future, playing for thousands of people who had tears in their eyes, and wondered if this image could one day be a reality.

Time is nonlinear. It is flowing around us at all times, the present becoming the past, and the past bleeding into our presents. The smallest

sensation can trigger time travel; a smell, a color, an object, or a sound, and suddenly you're thrown years behind into an old memory or a future desire. Music is in every part of me —past, present, and future. I'm constantly floating in a space of sound, carried on the backs of chords and harmonies through every moment of life. Since childhood, it has been a complicated and ever-present best friend. It knows me too well, calls for me to be brutally honest with myself, bringing back all details of my life to the forefront of my mind. At times, it makes me feel like I'm dancing through life. At others, like I'm crawling, fighting to move past a wall of thoughts. It's clingy and raw and inescapable, but I can't imagine having it any other way.

“Ed Sheeran,” I said, thinking of his acoustic tone (would I give the same answer today? Maybe, maybe not). Nonetheless, after learning “The A Team,” I practiced for months in the privacy of my bedroom, still unsure about sharing my amateur skills in front of others. My abilities were still developing, making me self-conscious when comparing myself to the kids who excelled at the guitar. Despite my aspirations, I had never sung in front of anyone before, and the longer I held it off, the more daunting the idea became. After I let a short melody escape my lips in front of Adam, our lessons became about cracking open my shell, and eventually I relented.

I essentially had to be forced into playing in Adam's spring concert nearly six months after my first lesson. Performing One Direction while wearing my favorite bright blue sweater in front of a crowd felt unlike any performance before. While there were glimpses of memories with my grandparents encouraging me to sing along with them, here, I was alone on stage and frightened to my core. But as soon as I strummed my first chord, I felt like I was releasing a breath I had been holding for who knows how long. After months of doubt, maybe I could actually make this performing thing work.

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“I'm starting a band with a few other musicians, and I want you to be a part of it.”

I had been playing guitar and singing for two years at this point, and while I logically knew I had some talent in these areas, I couldn't help but second guess myself in every area of my life. Joining a band like this meant more work, more uncertainty, more learning, and more comparing myself to others. Even though my career goals now strayed away from musical performance, I still put myself under the pressure of being the best, of

living up to the potential I once had and needing to prove myself. Whereas performing with my family felt unrestricting and unthreatening, I needed to be good enough to deserve to be in a band with other accomplished musicians; I didn't want to be the reason that others were judged or embarrassed. But, as soon as my parents heard of Adam's idea, I was enrolled in lessons with the band.

Despite the unexpected joy this group brought me, I needed the most musical growth out of us, which was difficult for me to come to terms with. I would make mistakes where others wouldn't. My fingers would be on the wrong fret or my harmony would be too flat, and immediately my cheeks would catch fire. Even though I knew my bandmates were joking when they would respond with a "what was that" or laugh after a screwup, I couldn't help but take it to heart. Visions of performing soon turned to nightmares with crowds laughing and pointing at my failures; I believed this was how an audience would react if I made a clear mistake on stage. And when I finally did, my voice cracking right at the climax of Corinne Bailey Rae's "Put Your Records On" during our first performance together, it felt as though all of my fears were brought into reality. All eyes were on me, and in a band of only four people, there was no more place to hide.

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"*I don't want to wait anymore, I'm tired of looking for answers,*" I hummed to myself, trying to force the chords of "My Silver Lining" into my brain before I went on stage. I was at the opposite end of the room, the "Hard Rock Cafe: Boston" sign a glowing beacon behind the current performers. This was my third time playing this venue, and regardless of the fact that it was just a small bar, the enormity of it all never got easier. My band was counting on me, I couldn't forget the words mid-song again. They're all so talented, it barely looks like they even have to try, I thought about the band playing before us. "*I try to keep on keeping on.*"

We'd been practicing for this show, the music school's Summer Showcase, for months, the fingerings ingrained into my hands, as evident in the calluses on my fingertips. But, even though we had been performing together for a few years now, this happened every time; the second I saw that stage, the moment I saw someone else go up there and crush it, I lost all feeling in my body. My hands went numb, my mouth dry, and my mind filled with nothing but dark, swirling clouds. Before I performed, I couldn't help but remember all my screwups, all the flat notes and wrong chords from the past. Remember that time your voice cracked when you tried to

hit that high note? my mind teased as the memory burned behind my eyelids.

How can I not? I responded to myself. *I haven't practiced enough. I'm leaving for college next year, I should be making the most of the time I have left with them. I've been practicing for how many years and I'm still not as good as them.*

From the moment I stepped on the stage until the second I left, I'd completely blacked out, not a thought entered my mind. I no longer had thoughts of screaming crowds or my family's laughter or the images of the lyrics. I just wanted to play the music and leave before I could make a mistake and draw attention to myself. I got on stage, my hands shaking and breathing shallow. I just tried to look down, ignore the crowd and get through it. My face was blank as I trudged through each song. While the crowd applauded for me, a stiff and uninterested looking musician, tears danced in the corner of my eyes. My voice had cracked, just like I feared, and I wondered, do I want to do this anymore?

It hurts to question something you've loved for so long. It's shameful and crushing, like a sudden boulder lodged in your lungs, and I couldn't tell if I felt embarrassed for even considering it or finally admitting it to myself. At this point, I didn't know who I was with or without the music.

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It's been two and a half years since I've performed on stage. Like everyone else, the pandemic stopped my world, and suddenly all my responsibilities came to a halt. I was too caught up in questioning the future, questioning who I was becoming, to continue pressuring myself. I lost my schedule and took a break from thinking and doing anything, including performing music. Listening to music was still a constant part of my life; I could never leave it behind even when it felt like it was mocking me. But if I'm not forced to feel that anxiety of performing again, that pain in my chest, the dryness in my mouth, and the tremors in my hands, why would I willingly put myself through it?

To this day, I cannot listen to videos of myself playing. I can't listen to the songs I used to perform without thinking about where I went wrong. I now struggle to find the harmonies that my band would once practice over and over again until we got the tones just right. My guitars collect dust along their cases from where they sit across my bedroom. My fingers no longer have calluses, I don't know if I can still read sheet music, I don't even know if I remember my own voice, and I'm disappointed in myself for all

these things.

As the time's gone by, I find I have no excuse for the neglect of my instruments. I've never felt more like myself yet more terrified of exposing me than when I'm playing. In truth, I'm just scared of myself and what will happen if I do perform and show myself to the world: will I succeed or will I prove my worst fears correct? Music is both my best friend and my biggest fear. As I come to terms with this, I'm trying to reconcile with it again. Forcing myself to remember the good times, the times with my grandparents, with the music school and jamming with my band—it's painful at times, but I'm starting to feel its warmth again.

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At 2 AM Monday night, I played my first song in nearly a year on my boyfriend's guitar. It was tucked away in the corner, and he encouraged me to pick it up, to play at an open mic night. For the first time in months, I picked up the instrument, not to test myself like I once would have, but just to experiment. I just wanted to see what would happen.

As I started playing, the frets immediately fell into place. He started singing "Sweet Creature" by Harry Styles, but it was really "Blackbird" by the Beatles. Clearly it wasn't perfect, but I wasn't frustrated with myself for it not sounding identical to the original. My hands weren't shaking like they used to. Seeing his smile makes me start to remember why I wanted to do this in the first place. I just laughed and let the memory soak into me.