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Growing

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Growing

Author Bio

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Growing

HANNAH CROWLEY

There is a tree growing in my bedroom back home. The trunk has fused with the aquamarine wall behind it, forming a stalk that reaches its branches to my ceiling, winding and extending across into every corner. It started out as a sprout when I was in middle school, a twig with a single leaf threatening to give way to the ease of gravity and fall to the floor. Now, the limbs, some spindly, others thick and hardy, reach far enough to tickle my nose from my bed on the opposite wall. Roots that were once tiny and wiry now snake beneath my navy carpet and break through the surface. Each passing year of my life brings new leaves, a stronger trunk, new growth.

All along the brown bark, scratches scar the surface of the tree's skin. Dozens, hundreds of lines of script carved in with a knife. Some are full sentences, others hearts with initials inside, or just a solitary word: *clarity is not glamorous; HC + AD; trying*. They range in age, some I scrawled years ago, others just yesterday.

But in the center of the trunk, years of growth and weathering have created a hollow, a nest to cradle and protect the thirteen notebooks sitting inside. Each a different size, color, and texture, they contain the details of my life, from the little jokes and memories to the biggest of my dreams, all scrawled in the same swirled, hardly-legible penmanship I've retained over the years. These notebooks lie at the very center of this growth, each page providing more strength to the branches, more stability to the roots, more power to claw to the sunlight coming through the windows. My journal collection is the heart and soul of my tree.

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Maybe this is all a tad dramatic for a discussion of what are essentially my diaries, but if journaling has taught me anything, it's to embrace the mess that is the act of thinking and just write it down as honestly and unfiltered as possible. So, that is what I have attempted to do in all of my past journals, and what I will attempt to continue here as I gather my thoughts: writing honestly.

I started a journal for the first time in 7th grade for the same reason

many people do; I was struggling and didn't know how to change that. I was fighting to understand who I was and what I wanted. I knew I liked to read, write, and listen to music, but I felt lost coming to terms with the thought that that wasn't enough. Not enough for college, not enough for a career, and, as I thought then, certainly not enough to stand out from any other teenager around me. My waistlength blonde hair suddenly felt dull and straw-like, my thighs too soft, and my creative ideas too generic. It wasn't that I necessarily wanted to be popular or jaw-droppingly gorgeous, there was just an endless sense of questioning and losing my identity like I had never had before. It's difficult to pinpoint why I felt this sense of losing myself; maybe it was school, trying to fit in, or the constant stream of media I absorbed on the internet. Or, of course, maybe it was all just the teen angst that is destined to plague us.

All I knew was that I felt heavy lowness. It was an endless wave pushing me back and forth about how I should act, what I should want, who I needed to be to succeed. It would get to the point where I would have panic attacks lying in bed at night, staring at the ceiling and, even though I didn't know if I believed in God, praying that in the future I would feel okay.

It was a random day of the week that I learned about journaling. I had been scrolling on this, now deleted, app called Polyvore where you could post outfit ideas and hand-crafted aesthetic collages, very à la Pinterest. Somebody had posted a collage in pastel blues and purples about keeping a notebook around in which to store everything — from your greatest ideas to your deepest secrets — in one place to look back fondly upon when you are older. You could glue in random scraps of paper, tape in photos, write down playlists all to preserve for the future you, sort of like a scrapbook or a memory box.

Sure, I had kept a diary for about three weeks as a kid and inevitably forgot about it, but this kind of journaling seemed aesthetically pleasing to me, so 2015 Tumblr. In the world of the early internet, this aesthetic indicated a sense of “mysteriousness” and “depth” for teenagers, a romanticization of the idea of being “misunderstood,” angsty. Think of the tragic artist type. And, as a teenager having been raised on the internet, seeing journals filled with hastily scribbled thoughts, profound quotes, and analyses of song lyrics perfectly exemplified this idea of broken beauty.

I grabbed a blank notebook I had sitting in an often unventured part of my desk, took a black pen out of my pencil case, and laid my supplies before me on my bed. Immediately, the first page was too much pres-

sure, a silence I had to fill by myself, the first thing others could see. I flipped to the next page — that felt way less stressful. Stream of consciousness, the post had said. Just write anything you are thinking, even if it doesn't make sense.

“Maybe this will help.”

It was a release. Being able to spill out everything, every worry, every half completed thought, every ounce of internal dialogue to finally experience some silence in my brain. That was the first step, the first little twig, the sprout of the first leaf.

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Over this Thanksgiving break, nearly nine years after beginning my first journal, I returned to the tree in my room, sitting beside my bookshelf on the carpet, my back pressed to the lofty trunk and the leaves fluttering above. My head was a jumbled mess, what ifs bouncing back and forth as I tried to make sense of the future, decipher what I want. With graduation looming, each possibility, each decision, felt like a complete finalization, a choice impossible to alter. Moving back home, moving with my boyfriend, finding a job, sinking more money into grad school; no decision seemed entirely correct or safe, and thinking about it sent my brain buzzing.

The best way to describe it was that I felt stuck, stagnant like dead air. No matter how desperately I wanted the refreshing flush of oxygen in my lungs, each breath felt stale, empty, and hot. With each push or pull I'd be affecting someone — my parents, my boyfriend, my friends — but for some reason I felt unable to move myself in the direction of choosing myself: what I wanted, what I knew would help me be happy, at least momentarily, rather than just trying to live up to the expectations around me.

The cool shade under the tree provided a solace, the bark a comforting scratch against my skin. Staring at the branches above me, I found myself facing my journals stacked one by one, and I ran my fingers across their varied spines. Maybe the best way to regain that sense of myself, who I am and what I want, is to return to that past girl and see what she has to say.

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My first journal contains a variety of musings, from everyday thoughts to big world questions. I copied down random quotes I'd found on Tumblr and doodled raindrops falling around the words. For example, “People cry not because they're weak, it's because they've been strong for too long” from Johnny Depp. Maybe that one was a little dramatic (but younger me clearly did not think so considering I proceeded to also rewrite the quote onto a piece of printer paper and tape it to my bedroom door

for two years). On one page, I had used black and purple glitter gel pens to draw stars shining over waves of the sea, encompassing lyrics from a Wind and the Wave lyric: *My mind is an endless sea / Maybe if I am good to him, he'll be good to me.*

There were long, rambling scribbles wondering why I felt so scared and telling myself “this too shall pass.” And the more I flipped through the pages, the more it did. Existential drabbles gave way to games of M.A.S.H played with my best friends, lists of places I wanted to visit in the future, and fancasts for my favorite book characters. No matter how anxious or scared I had been, things had gotten better, a little more into perspective. With each page, I could feel myself breathe a little deeper, my lips grow a little smile.

Continuing to rifle through my journals makes nearly every moment of my life replay; every scrap of paper, every doodle marks a distinct time, a distinct me.

Journal three marks my first kiss at age 16. Glittery pink hearts border the page as I gushed about how my then boyfriend watched me perform with my band at the Hard Rock Cafe in Boston for the first time, and then proceeded to kiss me on a bench in the rain. Two journals later, this would be followed up by a ripped-up collage of this now ex-boyfriend’s Christmas card with a curly mustache drawn on him followed by a very, very long rant. In my defense, who sends their ex-girlfriend a family Christmas card after breaking her fragile heart?

Journal eight contains the trials and tribulations of college applications. It holds pros and cons lists, stickers from college visits, and endless deliberation with myself. I was constantly comparing myself to the hundreds of other students at my uber-competitive high school, obsessively checking Instagram posts to see where people got accepted to and why I seemed to get rejection letter after rejection letter.

“I am ENOUGH” I wrote in Sharpie, the message bleeding onto the next page. I continued: “It was surprisingly therapeutic just to write that. The cry came, but that’s okay. I will not give others the power to make me question my choices and hesitate making decisions.”

And then I got a little more intense with it:

“The Fuck? The Fuck Dude? Who in the burning fires of Hell said that you could have any influence over my mind and my actions? Cause *ahem* it CERTAINLY was not me. How dare you try to usurp my power from me?? NO.”

WOW. I mean, what was all that about? Usurp? And who was I

even talking to? But in all honesty, I'm proud of myself for motivating myself and for not censoring my emotions. One of the things I had to train myself out of when I began journaling was censoring myself. The thought of somebody finding my notebooks and perceiving my writings as inconsequential or unsophisticated once made my cheeks hot, and I worried I should hide myself even from the blank page. Now, I find myself immeasurably grateful and proud for the moments in which I ignored this fear and I wrote the most unabashedly and without shame. It is in these entries that I can most clearly identify how deeply I felt my problems and how far I've come in healing from them. There is a tangible power in those moments.

Journal nine contains a bittersweet mix of emotions. Embedded in the pages is a sticky note with the scribbled answers to ice-breaker questions that my peer in a breakout room (thank you, Zoom college) gave me during our first day of class in my freshman spring: my peer who a year later would become my boyfriend. But just pages later, in a small section that is now bound with a paperclip so that I don't even have to flip through it, are paragraphs about the moments when I most disliked myself: the moments when my body most felt like an inescapable cage, when the mirror was my worst enemy. The nights felt long, failure felt imminent, and yet each page is proof that I kept going. I kept going for pages and pages and notebooks and notebooks.

Holding the journals, they felt like physical manifestations of my past mind. The leather ones are worn with the oils of my hands, others have tear stains on the pages (that I deliberately smeared to *make sure* future me knew what I was feeling). In the moment, no matter how irrational my feelings or my thoughts felt, these journals proved that they were real and true, and each new page, each new book, was proof that I had been strong enough to overcome them. They are all a part of who I've been, who I am, and who I will become; they are all a part of my evergrowing tree.

It was like sitting there on my bedroom floor, I was able to hold her hand, to be alone with my past self, the truest self. Under the tree, the shield of my journals and most vulnerable thinking, the culmination of my development to adulthood, I saw my younger self for the person she was: a creative, curious young girl, stronger than she could have imagined. I gave her a small smile, hoping she'd sense that confidence, the understanding, and ever so slightly her lips gently lifted back.

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It's been a long week and a half since break. And by long, I mean

I've broken up with my boyfriend, finished four projects, and binge-watched too many episodes of *Jeopardy* to count kind of long. And yet in that time I've also managed to write 25, maybe 30 pages in my current journal.

My current journal is square-shaped with a leather cover and a string that binds the covers together. The inside cover is littered with stickers I acquired over the summer, and many of the pages are stained with spilled coffee near the bottom of the spine. On the very first page, I traced out a quote that became my mantra. Over the summer, I saw Stevie Nicks perform in Nashville, and when talking about aging and life, she said this: "I would sit down and I would go like 'I am still Stevie.' I would listen to myself say that. And now, once in a while, I do the same thing, I put that bed on the floor, I sit down and go, 'I hope I am still Stevie.'"

For some reason this stuck for me. Looking back at these journals, I sit there and think, *I hope I am still that girl.*

Pretty soon, with the close of my time at college, I will return back to my bedroom, back to my tree, back to where the sapling first began. I will place this journal next to my others in the hollow of my tree. With that, the branches will grow a little longer, the roots a little deeper, and the leaves a little greener. I will look up from beneath my tree, noting each scratch and scar, and will think about how grateful I am. I'm grateful for every part of it: the love letters, the rants, the breakup explanations, each random thought. For every person who has been a part of it all.

I said it best in journal number nine:

"I never truly lost myself in the hard times, my mind and heart were just clouded...I still want to treasure my memories and the growth I've experienced."

Like I have so many times before, I will sit beneath my tree, and I will open a new spotless notebook, cracking the spine just a bit. The sun will twinkle between the branches, sending light sparkling across the blank page. The leaves above will dance, encouraging me to begin, and I will listen.

And with that, my tree will grow a little more.