



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2015

Article 3

---

4-13-2015

## Casualty of War

Meghan E. O'Grady

Gettysburg College, ograme01@gettysburg.edu

Class of 2015

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

O'Grady, Meghan E. (2015) "Casualty of War," *The Mercury*: Year 2015, Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2015/iss1/3>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Casualty of War

**Keywords**

creative writing, fiction

**Author Bio**

Meghan O'Grady is a senior French major. She likes traveling, baking and long walks on the beach. Her favorite novel is *The Scorpia Races* by Maggie Stiefvater.

# Casualty of War

Meghan O'Grady

Something awful is thrumming in my chest, not so much a heart-beat as a quiet buzz, vibrating just below my skin. Hmmmmmm, hmmm-mmm, hmmmmmm it goes.

"Alice. You came." Her voice doesn't sound shocked, or displeased. I nod, once, and make myself walk closer to the bars. "I knew...I hoped you would."

She looks small, sitting on her bed, hands tucked under her thighs and shoulders not quite hunched against the cold, but not exactly straight and tall either. The gray of the blanket matches the gray of the walls and floor, and her tan jumpsuit is doing nothing to brighten the place up. Her lips are the only thing of color in the place and they are patchy – bright pink in places where she chewed on them, pale and lifeless everywhere else.

"H –" My throat closes up on the words for no good reason. I swallow and try again, forcing the sounds out a little louder than seems necessary in the silence. "How are you, Marie?"

She gives a little laugh/sigh/hiccup that tells me more than it should. Her mouth smiles, but she doesn't move from her position on the bed. She has a habit of pacing when she's nervous and I think she's trying to hide it from me.

"How are you?" she asks, glancing up at me for the first time and then looking down. It's fleeting, but I think I can see a week-old bruise on her jaw. Not that it should surprise me – I was there when they grabbed her, and I saw the struggle.

I don't respond to her question, mostly because I don't know how. I am free and a hero and I am drowning in guilt and loneliness and I am wondering if I remember enough of her science to create the perfect poison and stab it in the neck of the judge. I glance behind me, but the door at the end of the hall is shut, and through the small window I can see the guard facing the other direction, giving us privacy. The other cells in this hall are empty – either because they are worried about Marie's safety or worried about what she would do with seven other cells of willing followers. Or else, death row is just not a very popular place.

"I brought you some orange juice," I say, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the small carton. It's barely four ounces – the most they would let me sneak in. I wanted to bring her an orange, her favorite fruit,

but there is no way to pass it through to her.

Her eyes light up and she stands slowly, walking gingerly on her left leg until she reaches the bars. The gaps are small – a crisscross pattern that leaves only one-inch holes. I poke the straw into the carton and offer the other end to her. She takes two greedy sips and closes her eyes in delight. I pull it down, out of her reach.

“Your ankle.”

I don’t say anything else, but Marie winces and looks down at her leg. “Yes. Well. They weren’t exactly gentle.”

“Should they have been?” It sounds harsh. I sort of meant it to. She presses her lips into thin, thin lines. That uncomfortable hum grows even louder in my chest. I think it says traitor, but I don’t know which one of us it’s insulting.

“Probably not.” She doesn’t ask for another sip of orange juice and I don’t give it to her. Instead, she hooks her fingers through the small squares and tightens her grip. I think she is reaching for me, but then I see she is just shifting her weight off of her injured ankle.

“I hated you for an hour,” she tells me, not quite making eye contact, studying my face in small, sideways glances. “I thought of all the ways I could punish you. You could be in the cell next to me.”

I know it’s true. They’re willing to put all of that aside because they want a happy ending to this whole affair, but if Marie starts raising a fuss, they’ll have no choice but to arrest me for conspiracy as well.

“Why aren’t I?” I ask. She blinks and looks confused for a moment, before she realizes what I’m asking.

“I only hated you for an hour. Then I hated myself. Of course you would tell. You always said...you were so very honest with me, even when you were lying. I realize that now. You were always just so...” she trails off, fumbling for a word. Normally, this is when I would step in and start throwing adjectives around until she found one she wanted, but this time I don’t have any idea what she’s trying to say. “...so very you,” she finishes, although she looks dissatisfied with her choice.

“How would I be anyone else?” I ask. I don’t want her to answer, but maybe I do, because the self I’ve been being lately is not someone I want to remain.

She laughs, and this time it sounds a little closer to actual amusement than before. She always liked to laugh at me. Except that usually, I was laughing too. “Exactly that. You are exactly that. I missed that. God – I missed everything.”

I want to tell her that’s it’s only been a week and she has no right to miss anything, but this week has been the longest one of my life so far, so I let it slide. I hold up the straw and she takes another sip.

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning," I admit. I would have thought that after revealing her assassination plan she would never trust me again, but apparently not because there is just as much betrayal in her face as there was a week ago, when the national police arrived at our door. Was it really only a week? It seems like years and it seems like minutes. The thrum in my chest was the same as it is now – the waiting for the hammer to drop, the lab doors to open, the bomb to explode.

"Why?" she finally asks, and I may be imagining it but I swear I hear her voice thicken with tears.

Because there is nothing here for me anymore. Because the people in the compound offer to buy me drinks or chocolates or fresh fruit as a reward. Because being here without Marie to laugh with seems pointless. Because my heart has forgotten how to beat. Because I can't bear to watch while she dies, and I can't bring myself to do anything to stop it.

"I think it's probably for the best."

She is quiet again, and she doesn't take the orange juice when I offer it to her. Finally she says, "I think I'm starting to hate you some more."

At least we have something in common again. "I couldn't," I start, but I don't know how to finish. I couldn't let you kill all those people. I couldn't bear to keep quiet. I couldn't figure out how to stop you on my own. I couldn't stop them from ordering you dead.

She reaches out with her fingers and just barely brushes against my hand, which is still holding the carton of orange juice to her. I move a little closer but don't try to touch her. She keeps her fingertips pressed against my skin. She is cold, and I am warmer, but growing less so every moment.

"You would have killed them all. Kids, Marie."

She stops trying to touch me and her head snaps up, angry and bright and more alive than I've seen her in ages. "They killed my family. They killed yours. I wanted them to know how it felt, to watch my younger brother, frozen, too scared by the guns to get out of the street!"

I know. I knew her story and she knew mine and we both wanted to feel something other than agony when we recounted it. And so the plan was hatched and I helped eagerly. But it wasn't until the poison gas was almost complete that Marie chose her target. And it was only then that I realized what it was I had signed myself onto. My family was dead and I wanted revenge. But letting a daycare full of children choke to death on poisonous fumes because their parents had been part of the war effort seemed just as bad as sending soldiers in to attack a city full of civilians because the president of the uprising was holed up somewhere inside.

"Those kids had nothing to do with it."

I begged her. I picked a hundred other places. City Hall. The Licensing Bureau. Gun stores. A military base. She would not be swayed

– the daycare center was the easiest target. It had fewer guards. It held the most precious objects. And the directors of the war would finally understand a little of how we'd felt the day their soldiers killed everyone we loved.

"They would have grown up just like them. There would have been more wars and more deaths and more orphans! Alice – I was trying to save us! To save the little girls like us!"

"By killing other little girls? The war is over, Marie. It's been over for three years. It's time to move on."

"He was my brother."

I don't know what I expected when I came here. I don't even know what I wanted. Marie will not be swayed, and even if she does change her mind, what good will it do her, a week away from execution? I should just let her die with her righteous indignation.

"I can't stop it." I tell her, after she has stopped breathing so hard, after we have both pushed back our tears.

"I know." She pats my hand again and I let her. Her hand that would have killed innocent children. My hand that is going to let an orphaned girl die.

"Finish your juice." She takes it in tiny sips, and I think that it does not taste as sweet to her as it did in the beginning.

"Thank you," Marie whispers.

"I wish," I say, but Marie just smiles a sad sort of smile. I don't remember her last happy grin. The wild one that made her look a little crazy and a little goofy, because her mouth was too big for her face. I didn't know it was the last smile I could enjoy when I saw it. For three weeks I agonized over what to do – how to protect the children and Marie. And so my last three weeks with her were ruined, and the weeks before that didn't seem special until they were already over.

I wish we hadn't made the bomb. I wish she hadn't picked the daycare. I wish our families hadn't died; I wish the war hadn't started; I wish Samson Hill hadn't decided to take over the world, starting with our city. I wish I could save Marie. I wish she would just die.

"Please don't cry," she whispers, her fingers making motions in the air as if to dry my tears, but I am so much taller than her and my face is so far away. "I'm not mad, 'Lis. Okay? I'm not mad. Not at you. Never at you."

"I'm sorry," I say, in a voice that sounds nothing like my own. I don't even really want to say it, because I'm not sorry for stopping her. I just wish it wasn't like this. I miss the Alice who saw Marie ranting and raving about war crimes and thought wow, someone who finally understands.

"Me too. I shouldn't have made you a part of it. It was selfish."

It's not an apology for planning to murder children, but in some ways it's better. At the very least, it's sincere. And maybe all I wanted from

the visit was for her to acknowledge that I was in an impossible situation. For her to tell me that I made the right choice, because hers is the only opinion that matters. But if she was selfish for including me, I'm being selfish now, for asking the girl I sent to death row to absolve me of my sins.

Thrum, thrum goes my heart. This is wrong. But it is the closest to right I've gotten.

"I'm sorry," I say again, and I drop the empty juice box and grip her fingers properly. "But I had to."

She nods and tightens her grip as best she can. We hold hands until the guard tells me that visiting hours are over.