



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2011

Article 17

1-1-2011

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Cochran, Tina (2011) "Remembering the Day," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 17.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2011/iss1/17>

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Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Tina Cochran is a fairly active writer. Her focus has been primarily on the novel and she has several underway, but within the past two or three years, she has begun to appreciate the value and structure of the short story. Flash fiction is a personal favorite. She plans to finish two of her novels this year and hopes to see both of them published one day.

REMEMBERING THE DAY

TINA COCHRAN

I shied away, trying desperately to disappear into the hard, green tough pleather. The tough pleather scratched my skin as I pressed against the metal frame of the bus. I sat alone with my face turned away, my sightless stare aimed resolutely toward the neutral territory of the bus window. It happens every day. Our private Christian Academy lets out midafternoon. We all file on and race to our assigned seats, the personal throne waiting for each of us in Hell. Hell for me, anyway. It didn't matter that my brother and sisters sat just a few seats behind me. It didn't matter that I was only seven years old. Hell's judgment was final and terrifying.

They sat across the aisle, waiting. Like Cerberus, they stood to attention, watching. If my gaze staggered away from my glass-shrouded haven, they would pounce. They set their traps and cackled when I was caught. A loud noise, a sudden jerk, anything to succeed in breaking my concentration and they would preen. They won. They always did. Faces contorted, hands clutching hands, they would moan and point. The older would grip his wrist, his fingers clawed and the index completely folded in so that all that was visible was the base. Each gesture cut open a small wound that should never have been. Day after day I grew smaller, unable to escape. Too naïve to think anyone would save me. I knew there was no one to help. Everywhere I looked those two brothers were always there, dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-minded.

*

I've always been. I will always be. I exist, not average, just unworthy. At least I thought so then. There is nothing special about a tomboyish bookworm. Our molds come in different forms but the final statue always gives off the same aura. We are average because of our lack of averageness. We are in almost every classroom, every crowd. Besides hair and eye color, nothing much changes. At least that's what we are told, if we are told. We are the quiet ones, soft-spoken and over-looked. We go to class, maybe run around the playground, but everyone around us fails to notice as we pass by. Why should they? We are like windows; people are always looking through us, no one bothers to examine the frame.

On one occasion and one occasion only are we deemed important enough to deserve their attention. More often than not, when that occasion comes to pass, we wish it hadn't. The hour of the haunters, the period of the prodders, no matter the group, the goal of the game is clear-cut and the players love to blindly slice away. We become a little more wall-flowery, intentional this time, and maybe, we begin to hope, a little more invisible. Eventually we reach the point where we pray they won't notice. We pray they won't care because we

know we are the easy targets.

*

A different school, public, that's close enough to walk to this time and things are settled. I've promised myself things will be different this time. I've made a few friends; friends who do not notice a tightly-curved left hand. I like them all the more for it. It is subconscious now, hiding it. If they don't know, they can't ask or poke or pull away. It's better if they don't notice. I've grown tired of trying to explain. So we run around the playground together. They flee and I give chase, and even though there is a distance; I can feel myself closing the gap. We don't talk about much, but that suits me. I'm not used to talking. I would not know what to say. I enjoy the silence now.

Almost three years have passed since I escaped from that place. No one knows, but my excitement toward changing schools wasn't because my one friend went to public school. I refused to let anyone see my weakness. I thought talking about it was taboo. No one in my family mentions it. My parents think that by transferring me they saved money; they don't know they saved a daughter too.

But people have started to notice again. I've grown too relaxed. The typical reactions ensue, but this time around I've found a few who surprised me. They didn't run and they didn't attack. I could not have been happier. I knew this place would be different. No one cares much about a maimed finger. In the end though, I was so busy watching the trenches I never thought to look up.

It was fourth grade, and like my classmates, I was enthralled by the chance to play an instrument. We were finally old enough to join the band. I wanted to play clarinet. It was beautiful. So I went along with a few others to meet the band instructor, Mr. Collins. He seemed nice enough. He had the five of us sit down in front of the various instruments on display. He went down the line asking the same thing. What do you want to play? Have you ever played before? Questions I am sure he memorized by rote. I fidgeted until he finally stopped in front of me.

"What do you want to play?" He tilted his balding head towards me.

"The clarinet," I answered. I was delighted when he pulled one off of his display. He held it out to me and I gloried in the feel of the long, lithe body in my hands. I was too caught up in the flowing curves of the mouthpiece to notice him pause.

"Perhaps another instrument would be better?" I looked up, surprised. His face was cold with forced sympathy. He arranged my now limp hands so my fingers were stretched over the instrument. Then withdrawing the clarinet, he lifted my left hand. "It will hold you back, you see. You won't be able to keep up with the others. You won't be as good. Try the trombone, it is better suited for you." He seemed pleased with himself. He had been selling his trombone pitch since we'd walked into the room.

It was the first time I had ever been told outright I wasn't good enough, but he was an adult. He had to be right...right? I dropped my chin and quietly agreed. I've gotten pretty good at keeping a blank face. I felt too ashamed to fight. My friends were watching. I kept my head down and spent the next year learning to hate the trombone as if it was, in some way, responsible for my pain. It would be six years before I would attempt to play any instrument again.

*

Anger is a heavy emotion. There are times when my mind races with it, the rage burning like a stick of dynamite soaked in jet fuel. My screaming thoughts begin to reverberate violently, raking across my mind. How many letters have I written only to hide them away? Letters to myself, letters to the world, letters of hatred and desperation fed by the insatiable desire to understand why. I lost my mind among those words; my composure ripped apart like an old receipt.

I hated life. I pitied myself. I raged in silence. The only witness to my loathing was destroyed the moment I shredded the pages. Paper was nothing to me but an innocent bystander in the way of my rampage. For all the times paper has acted as counselor, friend, confidante, instigator, and enemy, it kept its piece, and my peace. The others assumed I was all right, that I was happy. I was the quiet one, after all. What could I have to complain about? Everything in my world was pristine. I was the mature one. Interesting really, the way voluntary silence, suppressing the screams, can be misconstrued as maturity. No one would try to understand, for what was there to understand? And so paper and I, we kept up the act.

*

The images are blurry. The sounds are muffled. The memory as clear as the memory of an eighteen-month-old's can be. It is the memory that, normally, would have been forgotten had it not been gouged into my flesh. The room was small, but big enough for its purpose. Blindingly white despite the dust mites and fuzz balls that invaded the basement. Boxes, towers of them, were shoved haphazardly against the walls. To one side stood a woman, my mother, the vibrant red of her hair hanging loosely down her back. She stood at a table shuffling things about. I couldn't get her attention. She was working and I was bored.

The speckled white tiles were unfeeling, their cold touch stealing the heat from my small body. I moved across the room, falling about and stumbling. I liked the boxes. They were the perfect height. Blocks to play with, castle walls to scale and conquer. I deftly clambered up my cardboard stairs. At last I was victorious. I stared around my kingdom, my mother's ruby hair reflecting my gaze. I was bored again, almost, at least until I spotted my foe. Large, with sharp, jutting edges, my nemesis glared at me from its perch on the table closest to my tower. Its gnashing steel teeth gleaming under the flickering lights. The old-fashioned envelope sorter zoomed through its work.

I bravely stared the beast down as it continued to snap its jaws. I moved closer waiting for my chance. Endlessly, the soft clanging sang to me. I was bedazzled. Curiosity washed caution away like water running down a windowpane. I reached out, my left hand taking the lead. Closer and closer, I edged towards those hypnotizing, pearly envelopes. I pulled back in frustration. I was not close enough! I leaped the small chasm separating me from my comrade's playing field. Once fully seated on the soft white table. I reached once more. This time my goal was attainable. My hand easily passed into the mouth of the beast and, as its unforgiving jaws closed tight around me, I regained my senses. Rust-red burst into my vision as I listened to the whispered crunch of bone against bone. Shock overcame me for a fraction of a moment before, with my hand numb, I cried my very first and only audible scream. The darkness came quickly, temporarily releasing me from my physical pain.