



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2007

Article 32

1-1-2007

The Edited Senior Heintzelman

Rachel E. Rakoff

Gettysburg College, rakora01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2010

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rakoff, Rachel E. (2015) "The Edited Senior Heintzelman," *The Mercury*: Year 2007, Article 32.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2007/iss1/32>

This open access nonfiction 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.

The Edited Senior Heintzelman

Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Rachel Rakoff is a First-Year from Newton, Massachusetts. She is currently debating between a major in English or History, and is contemplating a Civil War Era Studies minor. Outside of writing, she enjoys photography, equestrian sports, running, playing violin in the orchestra (she is a self proclaimed classical music dork), and taking spontaneous road trips.

The Edited Senior Heintzelman

School had ended for another year and there didn't seem to be any place to go.

Rachel Brienne paced aimlessly around her room; the mid afternoon sun was shining and a mild breeze floated through her window, playfully pushing the curtains aside. Rolling off her bed and smoothing out the covers, she headed over to the windowsill and surveyed the quiet street below.

There was a junior high across the street. Voices of children filled the air as the school doors opened and the children ran out to the schoolyard. Underneath the voices and laughter of the students, underneath the rhythmic hum of the idling busses, a siren could be heard gradually getting louder and louder as an ambulance rushed down the street towards a nearby hospital.

It was the end of another school year and the beginning of another long, empty summer and days that went on without end. Days that she could spend forever with her thoughts and little else.

If she could talk about it, which she couldn't, she might have found peace with her thoughts. It didn't really matter, though. Who was there to talk to?

The room echoed with silence. She'd had enough of that.

Rachel changed into her shorts and slid on her running sneakers. Tucking a key into a hidden pocket, she went onto the front porch and closed the door behind her.

The street was empty now. The last student had been picked up and taken away as teachers had trickled out of the building in twos and fours.

Gathering herself together, she pushed off her right leg and began on her way. The streets were long and spindly; most of them led to the running trails that laced through the town, feeding into parks.

If she could talk about it, which she couldn't, she might have talked to a therapist. Someone with a Ph.D., a wall full of certifications and awards, and an overflowing bookshelf filled with reference books left untouched and unorganized for years. Maybe she would have sat down on an ivory suede couch, full of fear and uncertainty, as a younger woman (and it would be a woman, Rachel knew that, a doctor with a foreign last name, like 'Dr. Tanaux' or something.) with dark eyes and sleek blonde hair pulled back into a twisted bun sat opposite her, intently focused on analyzing every spoken word.

"Tell me about the accident," Dr. Tanaux might have suggested. She would have known about the accident because Rachel's parents would have told her already.

"I didn't know anything had happened. I didn't even care," Rachel might have said.

She wouldn't have talked about the little details that meant nothing. She wouldn't have talked about seeing the newscasters across the street and dismissing their existence as unimportant. She wouldn't have talked about how she never watched the news or read the paper in the morning, that morn-

ing being no exception.

But by now it was all too late.

Rachel's strides fell in rhythm now, the soft pounding of her feet struck the ground at a steady tempo, a gentle one...two...one...two...one..... She turned the corner and ran straight into the sun. Instinctively, she bowed her head against the glare and turned to take a shortcut through an overgrown path to reach the trails.

The sun retreated behind the trees, casting a handful of dusty yellow shafts of light down into the woods.

Rachel hadn't been back here in years. She hadn't had a reason to go back, she knew many other trails to take. She ran as if on autopilot; her legs lengthening and shortening her strides without a thought.

"You didn't care?" Dr. Tanaux might have asked.

Rachel wouldn't have answered right away. Instead, she would have walked over to the corner of the office, right up to the grimy window, and gazed intently on the farthest building away from where she stood. "We were thirteen. Who, at thirteen, can imagine anything bad happening to the people around them?"

Petals from cherry trees and needles from pine trees fell to the ground as a breeze lightly shook the branches. Under the shade of the woods, the breeze was cooler and more comfortable. Trees lined the sides along the trail, and the playing fields could be seen through the open spaces. Dogs ran around in and out of sight, chasing Frisbees and sticks, their barks reverberating through the woods.

Rachel squinted to see farther ahead as Rikai Hill slowly came into view. She laughed and shook her head, never breaking her stride. At the base of the hill, she shortened her stride and focused her gaze ahead, not upward. The ascent was harassed by roots and rocks, pine cones and twigs that snapped underfoot. She picked a tree root to steady her line of sight at for a half a second, and then picked another and another and another, all the way up the rise.

Rachel couldn't picture explaining to a therapist about all of this: how her mom dropped her off at school that day and how before Rachel entered the school, she found out that there had been an accident. How she'd pictured the bus getting rear ended, side swiped, and finally, rolling over. How she sat with her friends in a gymnasium crowded with students, and how she soon learned that four students were dead.

She could never tell anyone how, in a flash of fear, she'd pictured one of her close friends in a coffin.

Muscles aching and sweat pouring down her neck and back, she drove her arms and knees up, forcing all her concentration and energy on reaching the top of Rikai. At the peak, another runner came into view, his

form perfect and eyes firm and set in focus. He sailed by, passing her left to left. Rachel continued on the gentle downward slope.

"No one wants bad things happening to anyone of any age," the therapist might have reasoned.

"Well, yeah."

"It's a fair statement. But bad things happened to you and your classmates nonetheless."

"I know they did."

"Good."

"Okay, then." Rachel would have avoided talking about it, yet there was so much to say. She would think about it until the thoughts bustled inside her head out of habit, circling round and round. Breaking that cycle was what she was learning to do. The therapist would be sitting, waiting patiently for her to go on.

"They got us back to classrooms--I think they were trying to curb the rumors--and when I reached my homeroom, one of my classmates was hysterical. He knew who had died. When students found out he knew, we swarmed around him, desperate to know. A teacher took him away, consoling him and distracting us," Rachel might have said. The therapist would have cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips together, with a quizzical expression in her eyes.

"How could he have--"

"I don't know. I don't know who told him." And this would have been the truth. They might have sat in silence for a while as Rachel would have paused to gather her thoughts once again.

The trails sprawled out over hundreds of acres, some intentional, others created by the curious and the wandering. Each path looked essentially the same: covered in a dusting of pine needles, tree roots emerging from the ground in erratic patterns and rocks and gravel strewn about over time by runners, animals, and Time itself.

"And what about your friends?" Dr. Tanaux would have leaned back in her chair. "Did you have friends on the bus?"

Rachel would have nodded. She'd been worried about them that entire day, and she kept swatting away her fear of them being dead with all of her energy. She had refused to believe that people without silvery, wispy hair or yellow-tainted teeth could die.

"I went into a different homeroom, and after a while, a friend's mom delivered the good news: my two close friends on the bus were alive and okay. My friends and I were ecstatic; one girl let out a cry of joy. Other students in the room looked at us scornfully, but what did we care? Things would be okay, at least for us. At least for now."

"So your close friends were okay?"

"Yeah. I got lucky, and I was lucky to find out so early on. The waiting and unknowing made enduring that day so much harder."

"With good reason."

If Rachel could have talked about it, she might have talked about how she remembered all the details that didn't matter now. She might have

mentioned how at 10:41 AM she found herself in math class, watching a video about Nike Sweatshops.

Slowing her pace down a little and shortening her stride, Rachel looked up through weaving branches and patterns of leaves to the unanswering blue skies above.

What if she had been able to talk about it? What would happen? Maybe she might have been able to explain how the day just got worse.

"Just after class started, my mom arrived at school, and told me to get my stuff and leave. We had to go to New London, she'd told me, because my Grandma Bubbie was dying. When we got home, my mom reminded me to pack a black dress," she might have said.

Rachel's eyes were still pinned to the skies; she tripped over a hidden root and fell to the ground. Standing up slowly, shaking the gravel and pine needles from her legs, she brushed the dirt off of her palms and knees. Cautiously, she rolled her ankles in two small circles, backwards and forwards, to make sure she was completely unhurt. She pushed off with her right leg and began again.

The therapist wouldn't say anything for a while; she'd remain motionless, the expression in her eyes the only indication of her thoughts.

There were other details Rachel knew she'd never be able to talk about. Some things were just too hard for others to understand and too hard to explain. Like the media: how all the major news stations had an image of her school with blaring yellow and orange headlines underneath that read, "FOUR STUDENTS DEAD IN FATAL CRASH" and "FOUR DEAD ON A SCHOOL TRIP" and how every radio station repeated the same information over and over again.

"So, you went to New London?" the therapist would have confirmed.
"Yep."

Had Dr. Tanaux been real, and Rachel been talking to her about the accident, she would have said how she and her mom drove down to Connecticut, and somewhere in Rhode Island, the life she had known was forever changed. She would have talked about how her mom stopped at a Dunkin Donuts for lunch. She would have talked about being in a car alone, and hearing an unfamiliar voice over the radio bring the beginning of the end: "Once again...the names of the victims are Stephen Glidden, Kayla Rosenberg, Gregory Chan, and Melissa Leung." She would have talked about staring at the clock-radio for moments, unsure of what to think and what to feel. Above all, Rachel remembered one thing from that moment: it was 11:31 AM.

A light breeze picked up, carrying the scent of evergreen and pine around her in swirls of wind. Dodging around fallen branches and rocks, she looked ahead again; the path disappears in to a winding labyrinth. Trees blanket the sides of the path and she could see no farther. Heading into the opening of the twisted trail, she realized that the way is narrowed. She reduced her

speed almost unnoticeably.

She might have explained some of this. How she ran in to the store and into her mom's arms as she told her mom what she'd heard on the radio, or how her mom held her close and how she felt like she was outside her own body, watching herself and her mom stand there, in the middle of Dunkin Donuts as the TV hanging over the counter broadcasted news of a different matter, and the woman behind them in line shifted from side to side, obviously uncomfortable.

The pathways were overgrown and the bushes closed in on either side. Thorns stuck out of every branch, tearing at her arms and scratching her legs. She tightened up and tried to compress herself as small as possible, carefully running through the narrow pathway. The confinement of the brush was suffocating.

"Once we were in New London, at Bubbie's, I snuck into the living room to watch the news. There, on a tiny screen in a lonely room somewhere in Connecticut, were images of school, of students crying, and the names of the victims. I kept thinking over and over, 'I should be there' and feeling that I needed to be back home."

"But Bubbie is part of your family," Dr. Tanaux would have reasoned.

"Was. The accident back home preoccupied my thoughts; I just couldn't really handle thinking about much more than that."

"Fair enough."

Rachel wouldn't have mentioned calling a friend from a different middle school, and how the friend thought that Rachel had been on the bus, too.

"My Aunt Jill got to Bubbie's shortly after we did," Rachel might have continued, "and I overheard my dad explaining to her quietly that I knew who was on the bus that she'd heard about. 'Don't go in there. Let her be,' he had said."

"At least he was trying to give you space."

"I stayed away from everyone. Later, my dad asked me if I wanted to see Bubbie. I didn't because I was afraid, but it was a rhetorical question, so I went to see her: she was lying on a makeshift hospital bed, surrounded by hospice nurses, one of whom whispered in my ear, 'Why don't you go over and say hi?' I tiptoed over, cautiously approaching the bed. I stood by it, silently, looking down on Bubbie."

Rachel wished she could have said some of these things. If she could, she might have talked about how she'd heard one of the nurses whisper with a mixture of sympathy and contempt, 'She doesn't know what to do,' as Rachel carefully approached Bubbie, or how she'd felt a different kind of fear as she looked upon Bubbie as she rested on her bed, eyes semi closed. Rachel's hands had suddenly started shaking that day. She had begun to understand what it meant to dread, and what it meant to die.

The thorny path wasn't long, and she soon reached the break from the trail into the opening of the playing fields. Rachel nearly stumbled as

she ran recklessly over the now uneven ground, the transition between hard packed dirt and loose stones. Regaining her balance, she entered the fields where the unforgiving sun beat down, and the humidity glazed over every inch of land, making the air thick and hard to breathe.

"I grew restless at Bubbie's, even though I'd only been there for about a day. I needed to go home, to be with my friends and somewhere where I felt safe. The second afternoon I was there, I found my ticket home: Steve's funeral. My mom reluctantly agreed, but told me to say goodbye to Bubbie. I went back into her room and I leaned over Bubbie, giving her a kiss and saying, 'I love you, Bubbie, see you later.' And with that, I was off home to begin the week of funerals. After that week, I never attended another funeral."

She had left Bubbie behind and never looked back. She couldn't. She was too focused on everything else back home, and she simply didn't know how to handle it. There's only so much a person can take. By the time things had started to make sense, it was too late to turn around.

Rachel might have explained how two of her aunts died in the following years, but she still couldn't go to another funeral.

"I nearly threw up at the very idea. I'd mourned, I'd cried, I'd felt awful, but I just couldn't go to another funeral. Not after those days in April and May."

"Can't blame you. Four funerals in under a week? That's more than I attended in the first thirty years of my life." Dr. Tanaux might have admitted.

"Steve's was first: black shirt, black skirt. Family friends took me to it. Parked cars lined the streets leading to the temple, and the newscasters held their perch across the street. I walked into the synagogue where hundreds, maybe thousands, covered the room, and still people continued to pour in through the doors."

When the service was over, Rachel found one of her friends who'd been on the bus. They hugged. Rachel wanted to say something to her, but couldn't. She wished she could have explained why she had been speechless.

In the emptiness of the playing fields, the heat was sweltering, the air heavy and hard to breath. She changed course and aimed for the edges of the field underneath the shade of the surrounding trees. The sun scratched at her eyes and burned across the crabgrass and weeds scattered around the field.

"1,600 people attended Steve's funeral."

"The community just started to come together?"

"Something like that. Kayla's funeral was similar in size, tradition, and emotion."

Had Rachel been able to talk about it, she might have recalled that she got so sick of grieving and so tired of sadness, and how she tried to watch some mindless TV, but the phone rang, and how her dad answered the phone.

"He answered and paused, his tone changed then: it was sadder, more tired, and he asked, 'Oh...When?' Then he hung up. He called up to my mom to come down and they headed into the living room. I turned off the TV. He told us that Bubbie had just passed away." She would have said quietly. She might have said how her mom cried and Rachel slipped away upstairs to her room to explode as quietly as she could.

"Greg's funeral was the next day." She would have continued. There was still so much left to tell.

She would have skipped most of the details; they weren't that important to the story anyhow: how the church was crammed with people standing close together pushed up against each other; how she'd pressed herself against the wall, close to the window, in hopes of catching even the slightest wisp of air.

She wouldn't have mentioned how despite the humidity seizing at their throats and bodies that they sung 'Amazing Grace' and how the hundreds of voices filled the room and drenched the church in song, the music flowing out of the open windows and soaking the world outside, or how deep inside of her she hoped that their voices could reach Heaven.

"It was a beautiful service."

"They all were, I'd bet."

"This one was different for me. Unlike at Steve and Kayla's funerals, I could see the coffin clearly; his jersey was draped over the top. I could see the tears trace down the cheeks of his family and friends as they spoke."

"So you were close to the front of the room, then?"

"Yeah." Rachel would have paused. "I hated that."

"Why?"

"It brought everything home. It made it feel real. It made everything hurt."

She reached the edge of the field; the shade brought little reprieve. She followed the perimeter of the field to the next break in the trees. The last quarter of the trail was in sight.

She would have liked to explain how she hadn't cried at any of the funerals, how she felt heartless but could not find it in her to cry. Over the years, she had taught herself years before never to cry, never to show weakness, and now she had simply forgotten how to understand. She wished she understood herself enough to explain that to anyone.

The sky above was a pure blue, a piercingly perfect shade, not too unlike those days nearly five years ago.

"Filing out of the church, I saw two of my teachers from elementary school, which was where I'd met Greg. They were disheveled, unshaven and somber. I barely recognized them. They'd never looked so old to me, and I wondered if I, too, looked as old and weathered as they did now." Rachel would have added.

"Tragedy and grief can certainly change people."

"Sure. I saw my reflection at some point that day and I remember being surprised that I looked the same. I didn't feel the same, so it didn't seem possible that I was unchanged."

She neared the opening of the trail and ducked under the protection of the colossal trees. The humidity lessened as the angry sun hid behind the branches reaching overhead to create an arc of leaves. An older woman with

slightly graying brown hair and smiling eyes walked by with a golden retriever at her side, who jumped into piles of leaves gathered at the edges of the trail, and spreading the contents like confetti along the pathway.

"Later that day, we went down to New London to go to Bubbie's funeral. It was so different from the funerals from the previous three days. I was the youngest person there, and there were less than twenty people there, if that."

"That must have been strange."

"It was, it almost paled in comparison to the others."

"You can't really compare funerals."

"I didn't mean to, it just happened."

Rachel might have said how she still couldn't cry at Bubbie's funeral, how she left unchanged and guilty. She could have explained how they went to the cemetery and had to toss a shovel full of dirt onto the coffin as it was lowered into the ground. She would have remembered how the dirt hit the lid with a muted thud. She would have said that this almost made her sick.

She sped up again; home was near. The final homestretch was up ahead.

Over the past five years, Rachel realized she just hadn't been able to come to terms with it. She'd never had a real conclusion, a perfectly wrapped box with a bow neatly tying it all together.

Half a mile to go and sweat flooded through her tank top and trickled down her arms and back. Wiping her face with the back of her hand, she grimaced and dug in to find one more gear, to go just a little bit faster. Arms pumping furiously, she broke from the woods and turned onto her street. She fixed her eyes to the end of the street as she pushed towards the end. Exhaustion echoed through every muscle as her shins and knees pounded against the cement. Ten meters to go, five meters to go.

More than anything, she wanted to find a way to say it all.

She leaned forward as she crossed over the crack in the cement, gradually coming to a bouncy walk, and then a stop. She laced her hands on top of her head and forced herself to remain upright, filling her lungs with air. It was fresh, pure, and clean. She closed her eyes and walked in a small circle, focusing on her breathing: in...and out....

The sun was lower in the western sky, the pale blue cloak fading to a pastel glowing haze around the edges. The breeze was cooler now.

There were no echoes of children, no bustling of newscasters and frenzied adults. There was no rushing of fear and chaos of grief; there was only the empty street and the fluttering of the birds overhead as they sailed on, beating towards the sunset...

Rachel Brienne dropped her hands to her sides and then rested them against her hips.

For not being able to talk about it, she realized, she had plenty to say.