

## Things That Linger

By Sarah Hoeynck

Vomit was everywhere. I couldn't get the taste out of my mouth, the smell out of my nostrils, the sight out of my eyes—like copper and rot and moldy cheese all at once. After flushing the toilet for what felt like the hundredth time, I collapsed onto the cool bathroom tile and emitted a frustrated, exhausted moan. This had been the longest twenty-four hours of my life. I'd forgotten how awful the stomach flu could be, having successfully evaded it throughout my teen years. But it reared its ugly, bacterial head in November of 2005, just a week before Thanksgiving break during my junior year of college. I guess it was making up for all that lost time.

"You okay in there?" asked the muffled voice of my roommate Lizzie.

Her concern touched me. No need to worry her. "Oh, you know, just getting rid of all my organs. I'm donating them to my best friend, the toilet. We've gotten very intimate lately."

A soft giggle. "Cool. Let me know if you need anything."

What I needed was to stop puking. After thirty hours straight, there was nothing left inside me. I was totally empty—or so I thought.

The next evening, eight hours of not throwing up had emboldened me to try some Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup. Unfortunately, the salty broth wasn't sitting well, so I had to focus all my attention on keeping it down. As I sat hunched over like a rigid apostrophe swaddled in a blue microfiber blanket, the apartment phone rang. Since I was the only one without a cell phone, I knew it was for me.

My friend Zach's voice crackled over the landline, all the way from St. Louis.

I teased him, “You couldn’t wait one more week to talk with me? I’ll be home in, like, ten days. You didn’t have to—”

“Sarah, stop.” The words were sharp, but his voice was flat and hollow. My chest constricted. I knew that tone. He’d used it before.

“I need to tell you—” He paused. It was pregnant with dark anticipation.

“What?” I yelped. “Tell me what?”

“Greg’s dead,” he managed to choke out.

“Fuck you,” I snapped. “Is this a joke?” I knew it wasn’t.

“He OD’ed yesterday.”

He didn’t even have to say it. Heroin was Greg’s best friend and worst enemy. If Greg was dead, it couldn’t be anything else. But still, why did it have to be that at all?

I sank to the floor, bringing the blanket with me. I pressed my face into it and struggled to breathe, keeping the phone clutched to my ear while Zach filled in the details. Evan found Greg that morning, bloated and unconscious on his apartment floor. His works were still in his arm, and foam crusted on his chin—like any other overdose. Evan called an ambulance, and the paramedics busted out all their last-minute, life-saving maneuvers. Narcan, chest compressions, oxygen. But none of it did any good. They gave up in the ambulance. Evan called everyone from the hospital, and then the phone chain commenced, like elementary school in the nineties. Only this wasn’t a cancelled soccer game. It was a cancelled life, and Greg had severed the cord.

“. . . know he would’ve said good-bye if he could have. We need to tell each other ‘I love you’ more, right?” Zach questioned.

I couldn’t speak, so a sharp inhalation was my response.

“Anyway, I gotta go. More people to call. Come home, okay? Greg’s mom said she’s making arrangements for this weekend. I love you.” I heard a click followed by a dial tone but didn’t hang up the phone. It was still glued to my ear.

When I finally lowered the receiver onto the cradle and raised my eyes, four shocked faces stared at me. My roommates had heard my shouts and gathered in the living room. Seeing the worry creasing their foreheads brought on the tears. As I choked out the news, they hugged me and asked if there was anything I needed.

What did I need? I needed a drink. I needed to know the price of flights. I needed my friends from St. Louis. I needed to be with people who knew Greg.

Unable to help with most of my requests, my roommates got on travel websites while I called back home. I spent the next hour crying incoherently with Abby, Sarah, Nils, Jamie, and Zach again. We shared our collective grievances and grief.

What an asshole he was to leave us this way. Was anyone with him when he died? He’d been reaching out and no one had done anything. Did we let him down? It’s impossible to help a junkie. Could we have tried harder? We loved him so much. Why didn’t he love himself?

The tornado of comments and questions swirled around, an endless rotation of regret.

After using all of my calling card minutes up, my roommates offered their cell phones. They also showed me the flight costs to St. Louis—incredibly expensive due to the Thanksgiving holiday. My parents had already shelled out a lot of money to get me a flight for next Tuesday. There was no way they would pay even more for a new departure, death or no death. And I certainly didn’t have \$600 to drop on a flight right at that moment, no matter how badly I wanted it to magically appear in my bank account.

I shrieked in frustration, causing the knot in my stomach to loosen. A familiar taste crept up my esophagus, so I sprinted to the bathroom. That whole ten-ounce can of Campbell's soup ended up in the toilet, along with everything else I'd deposited the day before. But this wasn't the flu. The news had infected me with something else—something far more powerful and untreatable.

I screamed into the toilet then flushed it, just like Greg had flushed his life. He'd been a junkie for so long, but he was so much more than the drugs. He was my philosophical and literary partner. Sitting on Zach's trampoline, we'd shared long, meandering conversations about Dostoevsky and Plato well into the night, feeling the tickle of grey dawn on our faces while we disputed questions of morality. Without him, who would I talk to about the classics, or George A. Romero zombie movies, for that matter? The first time we met, he spoke to me in Spanish and cooked me a cheese omelet. I saw a blender of hot soup explode on him during one of our dinner parties and witnessed when he cut our friend Evan's arm with a butcher knife, simply because Evan had dared him. If only these moments had been enough for him—enough to keep him tethered to our world of life and love and health. Why hadn't his friends been enough?

My friends. All I wanted was to feel their warmth engulfing me. Why was I in Colorado rather than home with people who loved Greg? Jealousy stirred in my chest. They could all be together right now, and I couldn't. I had no one to embrace, to hold, or to cry with in Colorado. No one here knew Greg. In fact, no one at school knew any of my St. Louis friends. My misfit family was one thousand miles away in the Midwest. I was completely alone.

After peeling myself off the floor, I locked myself in my room, ignoring the tentative knocks from my roommates. I knew they cared, but I couldn't talk to them right now. Instead, I

took a Pepto-Bismol to settle my empty stomach and fell into a fitful, tear-stained sleep. It was punctuated with nightmares about needles and visions of Greg's blue eyes staring at me.

When I woke up the next morning, the apartment was empty. Everyone had gone to their classes. Luckily, I was taking an independent study block and wouldn't be meeting my professor until later that afternoon. Thank God—thinking about set design seemed impossible. But I also couldn't stay in that quiet place and make myself crazy, so I went for a walk to the student center.

After checking my mail, I spotted my friend Will across the room. When he saw me, his face crumpled into an expression of worry. Maybe my red-rimmed eyes and baggy sweatpants gave me away, but I didn't think I was wearing my grief so obviously. He came over and enveloped me in a hug, but it wasn't the hug I needed.

"I heard yesterday. I'm so sorry." He pulled away and searched my face. "How are you?"

What was he talking about? My roommates weren't even friends with Will. And how could he have heard yesterday? The call came so late at night.

I opened my mouth to reply, but nothing came out. I didn't want to talk about Greg. Will didn't know him, so any sort of sharing would be pointless. Rather than fake a conversation, I simply hugged him back, said thanks, and left. But my questions about how the news had reached him still lingered in my mind.

About an hour later, I slumped on the couch, swaddled in my blue blanket. A slow trickle of tears pooled on the microfibers. I was starving but couldn't bring myself to eat. Staring listlessly at *The Price is Right* was all I could manage.

A knock at the door interrupted the showcase showdown. It was a weird time of day for a visitor. Remaining still, I contemplated not answering, but the knock came again, a little louder. I

shuffled to the entryway, the blanket still wrapped around my shoulders and a pile of tissues clutched in my hand.

The rugged, tan face of our chaplain greeted me. Why the hell would my roommates have informed him, of all people? They knew I wasn't religious.

“Are Annie Jordan or Jeff Stack in?”

He wasn't there for me at all. Good. I wasn't equipped for adult sympathy. “They're in class but should be back soon. Want me to give them a message?”

“Yes, please.” He peered at me and noted my disheveled appearance. “Actually, it looks like you might have already heard. Did you know her?”

Her. What the fuck was he talking about? “I'm sorry, who?”

He breathed deeply and paused.

Shit. Shit. Shit. SHIT. This felt way too familiar. “Her who?” I demanded.

“Celia Meyer. We received word last night that she . . . passed away.”

“What!” The blanket dropped from my shoulders. I shivered wildly.

He grabbed the blanket and gently wrapped it back around me, saying, “Her mother informed us that it happened yesterday in Belize. She wanted us to know . . .” Another long pause, even more menacing than the first. “To know that Celia was murdered.”

My knees buckled, but he caught me before I hit the ground.

“I'm so sorry. Obviously you knew her.”

Knew her? Of course I knew her. Celia was one of my first and closest friends throughout all of freshman year. “I—I don't understand,” I gasped. Greg had died yesterday, not Celia. How could two people be dead on the same day?

He hugged me awkwardly, like my roommates had done the night before, but I pushed him away. This guy needed to get the hell out of here. His intense sympathy was like a choke hold on my brain. Collecting myself and straightening up, I stuttered, “I mean, I’m sorry. Yes. I did know her. Thank you for telling me. I’ll tell Annie and Jeff, too.” I laid my hand on the door knob.

Sensing my resolve, the chaplain nodded, a grave look wrinkling his cheeks. “Let them know they can come see me if they need anything. The same goes for you.” He left quietly.

I shut the door without a word and locked it. When the bolt clicked into place, I dropped to my knees, shaking and dry-heaving. There was nothing left inside me. I punched the door and wailed like a Greek widow.

Flashes of Celia swirled in my memory. Disheveled brunette hair sticking in every direction while she bent over my rickety Singer sewing machine to repair a vintage jumpsuit. Bright blue eyes staring intently at the mirror while she painted her self-portrait. Supple, strong hands massaging mine after we’d shared a sandwich on her lumpy pull-out couch. Knobby knees bending in the dust as we picked up hundreds of Ritz crackers she’d accidentally dropped. Two sets of feet intertwining as we watched VHS tapes in my dorm bed. Giddy, ecstatic voices singing Joni Mitchell’s “All I Want” into the crisp night air after Passover supper. No one was more alive than Celia. She was infectious.

How could she be dead? How could Greg be dead? How could they *both* be dead? Heroin overdose? Murder in Belize? Was I on some terrible cop show? Had my life become a true crime drama?

WHAT THE FUCK WAS GOING ON?

I stumbled into the hallway and down the stairs. I didn't have any particular destination in mind, but my feet moved toward my friend Will's place. Along the way I saw a girl named Gretchen burst from the front door of her apartment building. Our teary, shocked faces were mirrors. Although we weren't particularly close, we ran towards each other, our bodies slamming together from the force. Her arms crushed my back, and I buried my chin in her shoulder. Clinging to her, I let her lead me to Will's, where everyone was gathering.

For the rest of the day and night we told stories about Celia, smoked cigarettes in shocked silence, or cried quietly into friends' arms. Suddenly, I had people to mourn with, but it was so confusing. Was I crying for Celia, a relatively new friend who I hadn't talked to in months because she'd been out of the country? Or for Greg, an old friend who was separated by physical distance but always close to my heart? Or was I crying for myself? For the confusion careening around my body like a racquetball?

When I told others about Greg, they didn't have much to say. They were cocooned in their grief over Celia. Sure, they offered a sympathetic "I'm sorry" or a tighter hug, but it wasn't for Greg. Their detachment made me feel super self-conscious. Would my friends think I didn't care about Celia if I talked about him? Or would they understand? Either way, I was too confused to find out, so I decided to push Greg out of my mind. If I was going to make it through the next few days, I had to focus on Celia and her tragedy.

As we learned more, we realized just how devastating it was—not just for her friends, but especially for her mother and older sister. Although she had rarely talked about it, Celia's dad died several years ago in a boating accident, and now Celia was taken by another random, violent incident. She'd been out late in Belize one night when a man tried to rob her. Fiery, obstinate Celia refused, so the man strangled her.



Celia was strangled. *To death.*

Such a horrific reality certainly deserved all of my attention and sorrow—much more than Greg. Wasn't being strangled way worse than shooting heroin into your body for years and never being able to kick the habit? Of course it was. At least, that's what my guilty conscience told me, just to get me through the next few days before my flight to St. Louis on Tuesday.

Once the plane touched down, everything flipped. Suddenly, Celia was a distant memory and Greg became the focus. I switched my grief. Here, I could be with the loves of my life and cry with them over Greg. I could also be mad with them, could unleash my anger and shame over Greg's desperate carelessness.

But then something really weird happened. While I told stories about Greg or recalled memories, all I could see was Celia's face. When I told my friends about her, they gave me the same blank stares and empty condolences that I'd gotten in Colorado. The confusion was back, like a flu I couldn't shake. Who was I supposed to mourn? No one in Colorado understood my ache over losing Greg, but in St. Louis no one had any clue who Celia was. It was a total mind-fuck.

So how did I deal with it? As a newly minted twenty-one-year-old, I shut down and numbed my pain with alcohol. On my last night of Thanksgiving break in St. Louis, I polished off half a bottle of tequila at my friend Sarah's house. Her parents have these fancy, black vinyl booths in their basement. After passing out on the comfortable cushions, I threw up all over them.

More vomit. God, would it never end?

When I got back to Colorado, my final drama class before Christmas break was a blur—not just because of the binge drinking and endless twelve packs, but also because I lost myself in

my work. I was so distracted that one morning I fell off my bike on my way to class and slammed my head on the pavement. Staggering and totally ignoring the bloody skid marks on my cheek and left leg, I wandered to the basement of Armstrong. But it took me twenty minutes to get there because I couldn't remember where it was—even though I'd been there thousands of times. After listening to my directing professor talk for five minutes and not comprehending a word he was saying, I realized something might be wrong with me. When I explained what happened, my classmates asked me what I'd had for breakfast. I couldn't remember.

At that, a friend took me to the student health center. During the walk, an uncomfortable queasiness settled in my abdomen. Right after the nurses confirmed that I had a concussion, I threw up. Again.

My body couldn't take much more of this.

I was only twenty-one years old and trying to cope with an impossible situation. I'd lost not one but two young friends to exceptionally tragic but totally different circumstances. How often did that happen? And how was I supposed to deal with this schism? Each came from one of two distinct worlds that I'd worked so hard to separate for the past three years.

St. Louis me was *not* the woman I paraded around Colorado College. In St. Louis, I was simply Sarah—a lower middle-class, Catholic school hippie who could be silly and make mistakes. In Colorado, amongst all the boarding school kids and fashionable aesthetes, I was Hoinky, Hoink-a-Doink, SarMar, or Mary—a fabricated version of myself. A smart, independent, artistic badass who didn't need anyone and never revealed her economic status. Each side fit its setting, and I valued both versions of myself—to be simultaneously vulnerable and powerful, loved and contemplated, was exhilarating.

But these deaths threatened that comfortable division. How could I keep these worlds separate when I'd lost loved ones from both? Both sides ached at the pain, begged for relief, and yearned for attention. I didn't know how to bring them together, but I did know that I couldn't go on like this for much longer.

My stomach lining couldn't endure it, and neither could my heart.

In January, after a hazy, drunk Christmas break, Celia's boyfriend organized a memorial service. I sat next to my friend Charlie, holding his hand the whole time. I couldn't cry. Why should I? Who would I be crying for? For Greg or for Celia? I had no idea, so best not to cry at all. My stomach churned and the familiar taste of iron rose in my throat as our female acapella group Ellement took the stage.

Just as I was about to jump up and run for the bathroom, the harmony of delicate, somber voices rose into the crowd, accompanied by the simple beat of hands slapping on thighs.

"Sometimes I feel so happy. Sometimes I feel so sad . . ."

I stopped.

"Sometimes I feel so happy, but mostly you just make me mad. Baby, you just make me mad."

My stomach settled.

"Linger on your pale blue eyes."

Lou Reed's simple, poignant lyrics rushed at me like a tidal wave. Celia and Greg both had blue eyes. Impossibly bright, cerulean eyes. They bored into me, searched my face, my insides. I missed them both so much.

The song turned in my heart, unlocking the tears. I let them soak the front of my shirt. I didn't want to stop them, didn't want a tissue to mop them up. I needed the purification, to be newly baptized—to be born anew to mourn the loved ones I'd lost.

Celia and Greg had meant not just one, but two worlds to me. Why had I been so adamant to keep them separate? Splitting myself in half was no way to heal, no way to honor these rare, riveting people who'd been so tragically ripped from life. Keeping each death, each side of myself detached had broken me even more. So much so that the impossibly perfect, tender soundtrack struck me like a gut-punch, face-slap, and ankle-break all at once. But it wasn't a shattering pain. It was restorative.

“Linger on your pale blue eyes . . .”

The singers held the last, sweet note before standing in silence. The auditorium rippled with sniffles and sobs. I took the tissues Charlie had been offering me for the past five minutes and blew my nose, adding to the collective grief. I was part of this communal ache. No more disconnection. I had to embrace all my sorrow, all my pain. I didn't have to disassociate or distinguish my hurt depending on who I was with or where I was. Grief is grief, and the pain of losing a loved one is at once completely personal and completely universal. But I'd denied myself that warmth, that comfort, that chance for healing for two months. Basically, I'd made both sides of myself sick.

No wonder I'd been throwing up so much. Treating my feelings like a compartmentalized pillbox had wreaked havoc on my insides. But I could remedy this by breaking down the walls and taking all the medicine within. With that, the reconciliation could begin, and I could make myself whole again—both sides of Sarah in union, doing justice to the memories of Celia and Greg and their lingering blue eyes.