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## Dear Former Phenom

Meredith Beretta  
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DEAR FORMER PHENOM

by

MERIDITH BERETTA

KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD, COMMITTEE CHAIR  
ALISON CHAPMAN  
ADAM VINES

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2022

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2022

DEAR FORMER PHENOM

MERIDITH BERETTA

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

*Dear Former Phenom* is a collection of essays and poems covering my life as a female athlete in America, beginning when I was a small child and continuing to my retirement after my senior year as a collegiate student-athlete. As it stands, the collection is incomplete. This current version contains the core memories and the foundation of my discussion.

This collection tells the story of my failure to reach my full potential as an athlete. It is the story of me constantly achieving higher and higher achievements, awards, accolades, and praise until I didn't anymore. Until there was no one left to cheer for me, and my performance anxiety was so bad that I couldn't play well if my career depended on it, and it did.

This isn't a story about a girl who put in the effort and the grind to be better and prove the negative influences in her life wrong and emerged victorious. This is the story of a girl who did all those things and still failed.

My story does not end in fame and fortune or an impressive legacy for my schools to memorialize for future generations of players or even remember that I was ever on the team. Instead, my story is about failure. No one wants to admit that they

never reached their full potential and failed. No one wants to remember that the worst season of their life was often their last. This is the story that no one wants to tell.

I wrote this for the people like me who don't know what to do without their sport. Whose career ended, and they still cannot cope with the thought of never stepping on a field again under the lights with a jersey that means something. I want you to know that it is okay to be angry and sad. It is okay to miss game day and even conditioning practice. It is okay to miss ice baths with the team and early morning getting heat in the training room. It is okay to miss being an athlete.

## DEDICATION

To my dad for always believing in me and for the many road trips  
spent listening to the stories I created.  
Thank you for always telling me to write.

To my mom, who took me to every practice and came to nearly  
every game of my career. Your cheers and smiles made  
even the hardest days worth it.  
I hope to always be the strong girl you saw on that field.

To Manuel and Igor, who always believed in me, thank you you were  
the voices I needed to hear and the shoulders I needed to cry on.

To Everett, this story isn't just for me. It's for you too.

To Hannah, Nora, Maggie, Tawanda, and Elizabeth, you have all been  
better friends than I could have asked for. Your laughter and constant  
support are something I will cherish always.

To all the athletes who didn't make it, it's okay.  
You are worth so much more than this.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story is not unique. I think that is what makes it a good story. It is the story that I need to tell and the one that comes forward every time I try to write anything else. But I could not write this thesis alone. Kerry, you have been my constant encouragement reminding me to believe in myself, in my writing, and in my story. Your reminders that I am good enough and that my writing is good enough is not something that has always been present in my academic career. You have been more of a coach to me than so many others, and I cannot thank you enough.

I also want to thank my workshop group. Caleb, Tawanda, and Elizabeth, you have all been more of a support system than I thought possible. I have enjoyed reading your stories and embracing your companionship and comradery this past year.

And a wholehearted thank you to Adam Vines, Alison Chapman, Rebecca Bach, and many others in the English Department. You all have been a family to me, perhaps the one that I have been looking for all this time. I have found a home here, and I am grateful for your guidance, acceptance, and support throughout my time here at UAB. I will miss you all dearly.

To my friends Hannah, Nora, Maggie, and the many others from the Writing Center and my English classes, thank you for welcoming me here. I could not have done this without you. I came to UAB not knowing anyone, and I cannot think of better people I have met in all my life. You have given me more courage and happiness than you will ever know. You will be in my heart, always.

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“I will not stay, not ever again - in a room or conversation or relationship  
or institution that requires me to abandon myself.”

— Glennon Doyle

## **DEAR FORMER PHENOM**

Dear Former Phenom,

We were initially impressed with all your previous achievements and the promises you would bring to our program. However, after being subjected to your bad jokes, subpar performance, and a surprising number of riddles at practice, during games, and on the road, we regret to inform you that our time together has come to an end. You have simply become obsolete. You started off our program with strength, charisma, and brutal physicality. Whether it be due to your several injuries of mysterious circumstances or the massive performance anxiety you developed due to our excellent coaching.

We must not so regretfully inform you that it is time to hang up the cleats in the competitive arena. Your presence will be missed for a short while until the new girl puts on your uniform and someone else decides to be the team's prankster. Rest assured, we will deal with them much more quickly than we did with you. Perhaps you will find better luck in an adult league where no one cares, and there are wine and beer waiting on the sidelines during each game. Enjoy your retirement.

Sincerely,

The team that broke you.

## **GREEN LIZARD JETS**

I asked my parents if I could play soccer when I started kindergarten. All because I had a crush on a boy who played soccer. His name was Travis, and he died when we were twenty years old. His car wrecked into a tree, exploded and caught fire. There was nothing left of him but his teeth. I never got the chance to thank him. I wish I could tell him just how much he impacted my life. He led me on the path to being phenomenal.

My career as a phenom began when I was about five years old. In 2002, my parents knew next to nothing about soccer. We were late to my first practice at Hermon Fields, five miles from my childhood home. As a family, we are late for everything—a strange trait for a family of six with four members identifying as a type-A personalities. I trotted up to the field, dragging a drawstring bag that weighed more than I did.

I was proud to wear my uniform. I squealed when my mom pulled out my polyester shiny black checkerboard shorts and pulled the white drawstring tight so they wouldn't fall off. I tried on my neon green t-shirt every day for a week before practice. I traced the raised white advertisements on the back with my stubby tan fingers dusted with salt from my potato chips.

My tiny black cleats glistened in the green grass, pristine for the last time. My rust curls bobbed in my pigtails as I bent to pull up my long black socks. My dad ran behind me, calling my name, “Meridith, wait! Your shin guards!” I turned around to see my dad crossing the bridge, holding my shin guards in his hands, waving them around in the air, the Velcro straps tangled together. I still remember how small those shin guards were.

My dad could palm them both in one hand. He finally reached me on the field and bent to help me put the shin guards on, but he stopped. My father didn’t know how I was supposed to wear them, so he decided to strap them on top of my socks and sent me on my way to my new team and friends.

My coach laughed but let me continue practice with my shin guards on the outside of my socks. I chased the ball around our tiny field, kicking them at pug goals and hugging my friends as I ran past.

My coach whispered to one of the parents, “the girl with the shin guards on the outside of her socks, she will be something fierce.” They laughed as he called us to our first huddle.

This was important business. We had to come up with our team’s name. Our eyes widened with the possibilities.

“Can we be anything we want?” one girl with blue eyes and a long blonde ponytail asked with amazement in her eyes.

“Anything we want, but we have to agree.” My coach answered soft but firm.

We debated for a few minutes amongst ourselves. We all offered a name to the group, and we would vote. The name with the most votes would become our team’s name. Finally, after ten minutes of ten little girls yelling, laughing, and jumping around, we were down to two names, The Green Jets or The Green Lizards. We were split right down the middle. We turned up to our coach with confusion. He swallowed, and his lips tightened into a thin line and his brows furrowed. The girls began to argue, and as we were quickly losing our patience, I put my finger to my mouth and looked up to the sky. I thought, and I thought, and I raised my hand as far as my shoulder would let me.

My coach looked at me and said, “yes, Meridith?” anticipation and a little worry on his brow were evident, but he let me speak.

“What if we used both names? That way, we all get what we want!” I smiled, folding my arms behind my back, waiting for his response, and twisting my torso.

He smiled, “What does everyone think? Shall we be The Green Lizard Jets?”

My teammates erupted into laughter and squeals. We were all satisfied with that outcome, and my team was formed. My coach put his hand in the middle of our huddle, and we all put our hands on top. He said, “On three, we all say our name, okay?”

“Okay!” we shouted in unison.

He began to count, “One. Two. THREE!”

We erupted into screams as we shouted, “GREEN LIZARD JETS!” After the hour was over, we returned to our parents. Our lips and tongues-stained various ranges of red, orange, and blue from our Gatorades and popsicles the team mom brought for that week. So, this is how my soccer career began, with my shin guards on the outside of my socks and my lips-stained blue surrounded by friends and laughter. I thought this was how it would always be, but with better wardrobe choices, obviously. But, as we all realize as we grow up, everything in our lives becomes hard and a chore at some point, and the sport I loved so much from day one would one day become the worst part of my day.

What I didn't know then is that for teams to succeed, there must be a level of cohesion and respect for one another. We had that at five years old. It was lost as we grew older. Individuality and success make others jealous, and when jealousy sets in, cohesion and respect are lost. I wish someone would have told me that the people that were supposed to be my best friends and my biggest support system, and I theirs, would fail me. They would turn into enemies and liars. They would sabotage me before I had the chance to succeed. Because when one person on the team with a solid foundation in the dynamic turns on you, the entire team follows suit and the coaches soon after.

Individuality and personal goals are viewed as selfish and detrimental to the team. Their jealousy sticks to your uniform like the turf pellets you find weeks later all over

your house and car. It rubs you raw and follows you home. You must understand that the sport never broke me; injury after injury, I returned stronger and better than before. But the people and my teammates broke me beyond repair, and it shattered me in every aspect of my life. This is how my journey begins; let me show you how it ends.

## DISCIPLINE

The definition of the word *discipline* depends on the outcome that you are trying to achieve. Generally, as a noun, it means the control gained by enforcing obedience and order, but it can also be a punishment. In which case, it is defined as training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties of moral character. As a verb, it is to train or develop by instruction or exercise, specifically in self-control. Finally, my personal favorite is to punish or penalize for obedience and enforcing and perfecting moral character. I was disciplined. I was so disciplined that it looked like I wasn't.

I can remember Lorenzo's voice booming in their percussion, "you have to be disciplined if you want to be great." I nodded. I tucked my chin and looked up beneath my eyebrows as I dug my toes into the ground. I can still hear the grass turn and twist beneath my feet. It wasn't just the sound. I felt –feel the snap of the grass under my spikes. My promise to everyone around me was that they wouldn't catch me, and I wouldn't stop even if they did. I didn't stop –I never stopped.



January 2018

The sound of the buzzer reverberates through my body, and my heart bursts from my ears. His voice is booming and strong –GO! I ran. I tried my hardest to pace myself, but I couldn't. I ran for goals, and I would run until I met that goal, but no one ever taught me how to run with discipline. I only knew how to run to win. The white line



quickly approached me, and the stampede of girls behind me was the only sound I could hear above my own breathing. My breathing –damn it. It was way too fast.

We reached the line and turned back to where we came. We kept running.

I needed to slow down my breaths, but the panic started to set in. The tightness in my chest started creeping quickly into my gasps as a balloon filled in my chest as it was simultaneously compressed. There was no way for the air to escape but through the tiny, pinched hole at the bottom of the balloon, but air could still fill my lungs. It burns. *God damn it, it fucking burns.* I look over at Lorenzo, and I can feel the tears well in my eyes. His face and the disappointment that was written there filled my pupils as I stumbled and what's worse was the expectation of that disappointment that I knew was there. I was going to fail this test, again.

The shame burned on my cheeks. I could already hear the inevitable after pre-season meeting we would have in his office. My back would be to the door with the elevated indoor track out the windows to our left. His achievements would surround me as a coach and as a player. The “Coach of the Year” plaques littered the wall behind me. I could have pointed out each one with my eyes closed.



I knew exactly how many steps it would take for me to get out of the office and how many to get out of the office suites and into the open air, four to reach the hall and twenty – seven to get out of the coaching suites. I would hold my breath the entire time. G would be to my left, and Lorenzo would be behind his enormous desk with a cup of coffee staining recruiting files. The girls coming to replace me with each mistake. They did this thing at the beginning of each meeting where they would throw a beach ball

covered in questions at me, and when I caught it, I would answer whatever question my right thumb was on. It was a way of setting the players at ease in the meeting, and it never worked. Silly questions like, “what’s your favorite verb” or “the best sport movie of all time” didn’t do much to set my nerves when every time I stepped through the door of that office, he just looked at me and sighed as he shook his head with the following groan.

He would say, “you didn’t do the workouts like you were supposed to this summer. If you had, you would’ve passed my fitness tests.” It was simple as that.

There were no questions on what was going on, what I was dealing with, how they could help, and no plan for the future.

“You’re not disciplined,” he would say with a sighing chuckle and shrug his shoulders as he continued. “I can’t do anything to help you if you aren’t committed to the team and the program. You want to be lazy all summer doing God knows what with your boyfriend or eating all the Chick- Fil – A you want with no regard for your body or fitness. Well, I can’t stop you, but until you get your shit together, you won’t be playing. That’s for damn sure. So don’t expect to set foot on the field during the game.” I would nod my head and say nothing. I remembered what happened every time I challenged what he thought of me. I only lost more. He would end the meeting with a comment on my perfume and try to guess what it was. It was always the same for four years, Chance by Chanel. He would say how much he liked it. I always hated that, but I loved it too. It was one of the only consistent compliments he ever gave me. I cherished it and hated myself and him. I still wear it now.



“SEVEN!”, he called out from the sideline, laughing. God, we were already at seven out of ten 120s, and I was in the back of the pack. I had zoned out while running trying to prepare myself for the grueling meeting I would endure in a week. I had to prepare now. I was going to fail. I turned back from the line and headed back down the field. The alarm sounded for us to go again just before I hit the line. He shouted again.

“BERETTA! YOU FAILED!”

I bit my lip and dug in deeper. I would run all ten sprints even if I had already failed the test. I would be disciplined, and I would finish them all. I looked to see if he was proud of me. I wanted some recognition of my drive, passion, and willingness to give it all and then some. All I saw was disgust. I wouldn't abandon my teammates who were still running, and I wouldn't abandon my discipline, and all it did was make him hate me more. He had to have seen it, how much I cared. He had to have seen me. He just didn't care.



I remember my sophomore year of high school. I became so disciplined that I could achieve anything. My days were structured and regimented and left little no room for error or free time. It started during the summer when club try-outs happened. We got a new coach, and for the first time, we were told we actually had to try out for the team. The coach didn't know who we were and didn't care if we played on the Black team, our highest-ranking team for the age group, or not. She wouldn't pick us just for that. So, I played, and I played well. I was chosen, as was expected, and continued with the

girls I had been playing with for almost five years, although a few didn't make the cut and dropped down to the White team. I hugged them as they cried.

My new coach's name was Hailey, and she was the hardest coach I ever played for. She warned us at tryouts that we would have fitness tests at the start of the season in August and that we needed to prepare during the summer. I, like many other girls, didn't listen. I was wrong. I learned discipline from Hailey in that first practice. We walked onto the field, and we walked us through the warm-up, leaving us panting. I should've known from there that it would be a hard day. We all failed every single test she gave us. So, for the following two weeks before the club tournament, we practiced twice a day and did nothing but run.

This was the fittest season of my life. I needed to lose weight to be faster, and I had to run in my spare time to build my endurance. I began my diet. I told myself that I would eat twice a day during summer, once in the morning and once at night. In the morning, I ate Honey Nut Cheerios with blueberries and milk. I drank water all day, and I would not eat again until dinner. Then at dinner, I would not eat my entire plate. I would leave a little bit of everything. So, I did. I went from 135 pounds to 107 in one month.

I ran, and I ran, and I ran until I passed my tests. Then, as the months passed, I played more and more until my position was changed from center forward to a right outside back. We played a 4 – 3 – 3 or a 4 – 5 – 1 but regardless, this meant I had to run the length of the field the entire game. I was not only a defender but a midfielder, a striker, a playmaker, and a scorer, all wrapped into one. Then, the liver cramps set in.

We were running our 120s maintenance fitness test when I felt a stabbing pain in my side like I was being electrocuted. I collapsed on the field. Because of my lack of nutrition, my body didn't have enough food to create glycogen to send to my muscles to keep running. So, my body did what the human body always does. It changed. It started to pull glycogen from my organs to fuel the rest of my body, and the largest store of it was in my liver. I collapsed to the ground and screamed. All my hard work and all my discipline meant nothing if my body was going to give out on me.

My parents started to take notice of what was happening. They looked at me with concern when I said I wasn't hungry for seconds or even finished what was on my plate. But I remembered the pride in their eyes when I could wear a size two jeans and a size 0 formal dress. I knew where my worth came from, beauty, and athletic ability.

Of course, as any good parent does, they tried to make me eat more. During the school year, I ate breakfast in the form of a slim fast protein shake and coffee, and all I would eat at school would be Belvita breakfast bars and celery with peanut butter. I drank nothing but water during the day, and I slept often.

I downloaded the My Fitness Pal app on my phone with the suggested caloric intake of 1200 per day without exercise. My goal was to eat less than 800 calories. The app gives you a projected weight in two weeks or whatever time duration you set and when you should reach your goal weight. However, if you ate less than 1000 calories in a day, it wouldn't give you a projection. Instead, the program gave you a warning message that you weren't eating enough. This message became my new goal. It was like gospel to me. I was so proud when I stayed under 800 calories in a day. I knew I would be beautiful, and I would be able to play.

I relished in the hunger pains that came with my discipline. They would start with a growling stomach, then move to a stomach cramp, then a headache, and finally, the last stage would be fatigue and nausea washed around with severe stomach cramps.

However, after about two hours of the final stage, the pain would go away, and I would feel fine again. If it lasted longer, I would just sleep or chew gum and drink more water to help myself convince my brain and my stomach that they were being fed.

## **BY THE SKIN OF MY TEETH**

As of 2020, the rate of eating disorders in American female athletes at the collegiate level reached as high as 45% and 19% in male athletes. Eating disorders are more common in endurance-based sports like track and field, swimming, and cross country compared to those that require an increase in varying movements and changes in speed, such as tennis, wrestling, football, soccer, and many more. However, those sports that require both strength and endurance create complicated expectations from coaches and more complicated physical demands in those athletes. The DSM – 5 diagnoses eating disorders into seven separate categories with multiple stages of diagnosis for each. These are the basic requirements, but they vary from here:

**Pica** – a persistent eating of nonnutritive, nonfood substances over the period of at least one month

**Rumination Disorder** - Repeated regurgitation of food over the period of at least one month. Regurgitated food may be re-chewed, re-swallowed, or spit out

**Avoidant / Restrictive Food Intake Disorder** - A feeding or eating disturbance (e.g., lack of apparent interest in eating food; avoidance based on the sensory characteristics of food; concern about aversive consequences of eating) as manifested by persistent failure to meet appropriate nutritional and/or energy needs associated with one (or more) of the following:

1. Significant weight loss (or failure to achieve expected weight gain or faltering growth in children).
2. Significant nutritional deficiency.
3. Dependence on enteral feeding or oral nutritional supplements.
4. Marked interference with psychosocial functioning.

**Anorexia Nervosa** – Restriction of energy intake relative to requirements, leading to a significantly low body weight in the context of age, sex, developmental trajectory, and physical health. Significantly low weight is defined as a weight that is less than minimally normal or, for children and adolescents, less than minimally expected

Subtypes:

**Restricting type:** During the last three months, the individual has not engaged in recurrent episodes of binge eating or purging behavior (i.e., self-induced vomiting, or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas). This subtype describes presentations in which weight loss is accomplished primarily through dieting, fasting, and/or excessive exercise

**Binge-eating/purging type:** During the last three months, the individual has engaged in recurrent episodes of binge eating or purging behavior (i.e., self-induced vomiting, or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas)

**Bulimia Nervosa** – Recurrent episodes of binge eating. An episode of binge eating is characterized by both:



1. Eating in a discrete period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than what most individuals would eat in a similar period of time under similar circumstances
2. A sense of lack of control overeating during the episodes (e.g., a feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how much one is eating).

**Binge Eating Disorder** – Recurrent episodes of binge eating. An episode of binge eating is characterized by both:

1. Eating in a discrete period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than what most individuals would eat in a similar period of time under similar circumstances
2. A sense of lack of control overeating during the episodes (e.g., a feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how much one is eating)

The seventh category is known as **Other Specified Feeding or eating disorder** and does not fully fall within one single category of an eating disorder and does not meet the full requirements allocated by the DSM – 5.



*August 2018*

“H–hi, I’m looking for Dr. Hubbard. I am on the women’s soccer team, and I really need to talk to her.” I pinched my lips back around my teeth and bit down on them. I looked around the small fluorescent room and down at the blue and grey blended carpet of the kinesiology department offices waiting for the small woman at the desk to answer me.

She barely looked up from her computer. “She isn’t here, come back later.” The receptionist popped her gum.

“A-are you sure? She told me to come today at 11:30, and it’s 11:30 now. Are you sure she’s not here or coming right back?” I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes, and I dug my nails into my palms to push them back. *I couldn’t come back.* I scheduled this meeting when Lorenzo and G would be out of the office. They wouldn’t know I was here. *I was safe.*

Another pop of the bubble gum, “she isn’t here. She went home for the day once she was done with classes. You will have to email her and come back later.” The receptionist went back to typing on her computer, and I exhaled stiff and shaky. I walked to the door and winced as I put my nail-bitten palm on the handle and turned it. I heard Lorenzo and G laughing as they walked up the stairs. I ran for the bathroom.

I grabbed the door frame as I rounded the corner and threw myself into the biggest stall. My backpack fell off my shoulder as I fell through the door. I turned around and slid the lock closed behind me. I slid to the stall floor with my back to the wall and put my face in my hands. I was ready to tell someone. I was ready to talk about the awful things he’d said to me. I was ready to tell someone just how much it hurt. I was ready for help. I was so hungry, so damn hungry. I grabbed my stomach as a low rumble escaped, and the cramping started.



*Finally, I thought to myself, a nice evening for practice* as we warmed up. Late October was always when the weather in northwest Georgia started to turn for the better. We were nearing the end of the season and heading into the NCAA SAA tournament.

We had a decent practice, only mild verbal abuse from Lorenzo for me, so we count those as good days. We were ending the day with penalty kicks in preparation for the possibility during the tournament. This was the only time of year that we might go into a penalty shoot-out, and I was always on the line-up.

I didn't mind. I liked PKs and the rush of one on one with the keeper. Until my senior year of college, I never missed, but that was a failure for another time. For those who don't know, PKs are one of the most stressful times for any soccer player. You are one on one with the keeper, and the crowd will say anything and everything to get in your head to make you miss the shot. I have always handled this pressure well. It never got to me, and the keeper could never tell where I would place the ball; neither could G or Lorenzo.

In practice, we taunt each other. It helps prepare the shooters for the game and the real insults that drunk fans launch at you with no remorse. Some teams went as far as to stalk social media to find information to use against you during the shoot-out. G called out the roster of shooters, and we lined up. Your best shooters are always the first and last in the line-up. This gives the team leverage if someone gets the jitters and messes up by shooting at the keeper or off frame.

I was last, naturally. I watched my teammates line up and take their shots. Hit, miss, miss, hit, and it was my turn. I'd listened to my teammates and coaches laugh and holler as they taunted each player, throwing lighthearted and fun jokes at each one. Friends. They were friends and knew what would bother each player and what could be poked with little consequence. I didn't yell. I just watched and predicted where and how hard they would each shoot. I was right. My soccer IQ never failed me.

I walked up, and silence fell over the field. They didn't know what to yell. They didn't know what to say. They didn't know me. Only Lorenzo spoke as I prepared to take my shot.

He called out, "Beretta! Look, there is a food truck over there! Looks like pasta, pizza, chick-fil-a! Come on, you know you want to eat it", laughing.

My teammates didn't laugh. I could hear their awkward shuffles and glanced up at G, who was acting as our referee, placing the ball, checking positions, and telling us when to shoot. His eyes widened slightly, and he shook his head, but he said nothing. I lined up behind the ball at an angle to the left with my legs evenly apart and stared. I looked directly at the bottom right corner of the goal and let my body language tell precisely where I would go. It was a trick I liked to play.

The keeper would have to move just as I contacted the ball to get to the spot in time, but in preparation, they would narrate their movements. So, I watched, and at the last second, I would decide where the ball would go. The game was fun, and I never lost.

I took my shot and scored with ease. I turned and walked back to the line. No applause, no cheers, no laughs like the other girls got when they scored, and no encouragement like if they missed. Lorenzo sighed and said, "Okay, everybody, clean up and huddle up." He glanced at me and said nothing else.

I looked at the upside-down metal bench with the legs sticking up and considered how hard I would have to run into it for it to impale me.

I took a deep breath, and I turned, jogging off to pick up cones and round-up balls.



The tears were running hot down my cheeks in the bathroom. I just wanted to tell someone. I wanted someone other than my family to know what he said to me. I tried to confide in my parents, friends, and boyfriend. They all said the same thing, “quit.” I don’t know why they couldn’t understand why I couldn’t. I’d never quit a single thing all my life. I simply did things until it wasn’t possible anymore. I didn’t quit. It was my senior year. I couldn’t quit.

I’d come up to the top level of the Cage to find Dr. Hubbard, our new faculty liaison and nutrition specialist for the women’s soccer team. She played soccer at our biggest rival, Centre College, and was a fantastic player. She was beautiful and fit. If anyone could help, it would be her. It was recommended to us by G and Lorenzo that if we had any questions about nutrition, we should ask Dr. Hubbard, and she would help us get back on track.

I’d gone looking for help, and she wasn’t there.

I pulled out my phone from my water bottle pocket on my backpack and opened my email. I started typing.

*Hello Dr. Hubbard,*

*I went to your office today when we agreed to meet, and the receptionist told me that you weren’t in the office and that you wouldn’t be back for the rest of the day. Is there another day you could meet? I really need to talk to you. Please let me know.*

*Best,*

*Meridith Beretta*

I sent the email and closed my eyes. I leaned my head back on the cold tile letting the tears stream down my cheeks.



“You need to limit your sugar intake,” Lorenzo said, gesturing at the food pyramid on the wall. “All of you could stand to slim down for the season except a few of you.” His eyes slid to me. I blushed and looked down at the paper in front of me. It was a breakdown of what a female athlete should eat in a day and how to distribute the calories appropriately. Although, it didn’t tell you how to compensate for the calories you lost in practice. I guess they didn’t care how much of a caloric deficit we were in or the damage it could have on our bodies. They just wanted us fast and lean.

Lorenzo praised two girls on my team for their endurance and their frames. They were about 5’4” and 5’6” respectively, and neither one weighed over 120 pounds. I watched them slim down from their sophomore year, my freshman, to their senior year. I watched the peach fuzz grow on their cheeks and their stomachs. I noticed the dull glint their skin showed in the sun and the sallowness under their eyes. I watched them struggle with injuries and fatigue.

I watched their pride as Lorenzo put them in the game. Not because they were particularly good, but because they were fast and could run forever. He was killing them. Slowly, yes, but they were dying. He wanted us all to be that way.

I don’t know if he knew what he was doing. If he did, he didn’t care. But I saw it, and I knew what it meant. Before throwing it up, I knew what they ate and how long they kept it in their systems. I watched them die, but I didn’t say anything. I looked in

the mirror and saw the same thing happening to me, but I didn't play. So, I bought Doritos and Pink Moscato and cried myself to sleep.

In the fall of 2019, I was diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa subtype two binge-eating/purging. I had been enduring my eating disorder for eight years up to my diagnosis, alone. I was disciplined.

**PANTONE 15 – 1922 TCX**

Skin: a conduit for our experience of  
the world; a thin covering of nerves and veins

stewing blood shades geranium pink lips by  
light olive skin dappled in freckles and lines

like scorch marks on cherry wood,  
cauterized and sewn back together again.

My face the unintended canvas from four  
hundred needle strokes inside and out

making me the patchwork of his  
skill and undeniable talent, surgeon.

A medical experiment with chubby  
gloved fingers in my mouth, so I can't spit

when a stranger says, "oh, but  
you look so beautiful" or the grating

"would it be okay if I looked –  
inside your mouth" with a toothy grin,

as if they could see where the nails



stuck to find a new home in my sinuses.

My stippled skin is the color swatch  
they never expected to survive

like Tennessee orange or  
bell-bottom jeans and middle parts.

I bite to remember they are still there  
as I lisp against the newfound dumbness of my mouth

I bite for a drop of blood, a spitz of iron  
to forget the taste of rubber gloves and geranium pink.

## **“WHY SO SERIOUS?”**

*November 2008*

My life changed the first time at twelve years old when my horse trampled me on a trail ride for Special Equestrians. My horse tripped after cresting the top of a hill at a gallop. I was thrown onto her neck, and as I tried to scramble back, she tripped again. I lost my balance and decided that it would be best for me to do an emergency dismount and remount after I caught my horse. I spun to the side of the saddle to dismount and push away from Ruby so she would not step on me and hurt us both. She tripped a third time as I was turning. My left foot caught in my stirrup, and my emergency band did not release. My hands twisted in the reigns. She was still at full gallop. My right hand slipped on her shoulder as I tried to push off her neck, and I fell. I went headfirst over her shoulder, and because of my twisted foot, I landed on my neck and was flipped towards her running hooves. I saw the ground rushing towards me and heard my neck crack when I hit the frozen November ground.

I felt her hooves beat around my body and heard those that missed stampede the ground by my ears. I rolled with Ruby's movements. I attempted to crawl out from underneath Ruby as she continued to run, afraid now that I was under her. I dug my gloved hands into the hard rutted mud and pulled. I dug the toes of my riding boots into the ground, pushing to try and get out from underneath the hooves. Her back hoof caught me on my right rib cage and rolled back under her. This happened twice. The second

time, I flipped as I rolled. I looked up and saw her hoof coming right at my face. I had two thoughts at twelve years old, *I don't want to die*, and *this is going to hurt*. I threw my hand up to no avail and turned my head to the left. This is what saved my life. Instead of crushing my nose into my brain and the rest of my face, I was hit at an angle. This kept my mouth from being crushed into my larynx and prevented me from suffocating to death on the field. I would have died slowly, and there would have been nothing anyone could have done.

Instead, I felt and heard as my braces gave way to the pressure of the twelve-hundred-pound animal bearing down on me. I felt my bones break and disintegrate to powder, my nose broke and twisted, my cheekbones fractured, and the nails on her shoe ripped my mouth open to my ear and my bottom lip clean through. My braces would not snap, and instead pushed my teeth up through my nasal cavity and sliced my face off from my skeletal structure. I curled into a ball. Ruby jumped me and kept running. I stood with the world spinning like I was stuck in a barrel roll, and I started to run. I stumbled and collapsed on the grass, leaving puddles of blood deep enough to soak through my tennis shoes. I kept running. I screamed. I begged for someone to come back for me. I saw my trainer, Tracy, leap off her horse and run for me. I collapsed.

I heard Tracy's high-pitched voice, "everyone get off your damn horse!"

They hadn't left me. All of my friends and their parents hadn't left me behind like I thought they had. They would get help. I could go home.

Ruby didn't leave me. As I laid down on the ground, my head resting between my legs to keep me from swallowing or drowning in more blood, she pressed her nose to my helmet. She nudged me. I reached up to hold her nose and leaned into her head.

I will never forget the sound of my best friend screaming my name as I fell. She saw it all happen. When I wasn't behind her on the trail, she turned to look for me. Her horse, Sister, is looking for Ruby. They were just as inseparable as Elizabeth and I were and still are. Every year I text her on November 8<sup>th</sup>, celebrating that I didn't die but apologizing for the nightmare she witnessed.

I underwent thirteen reconstructive surgeries over the next ten years. I was the Guinea pig for a revolutionary surgery developed in Sweden to transplant a patient's adult molars to a new location in the patient's mouth. I am the youngest person to have had the surgery and the best success story with no dental deterioration. I have had my jaw broken, plated, and reconstructed several times, among many other facial reconstructions.



*February 2009*

After my accident, people came to my parents' house to visit with me. They brought me horse-themed gifts, puzzles, and food I couldn't eat. One of our family friends brought me a small whiteboard with dry erase markers, so I didn't have to keep signing what I wanted or needed to my parents. My parents don't know sign language, and I remember very little besides random animals, colors, and the whole alphabet. I couldn't talk to them because of the three hundred stitches that filled my mouth and covered my face — a human pin cushion or voodoo doll.

It's not like my needs were extensive at twelve years old, but I missed laughing and smiling. And food.

I was on a mostly liquid diet, but after three days, I started to refuse the Carnation breakfast shakes, milkshakes, baby food, and eggnog that was offered to me. I stopped

taking my pain medication on the first day home when it made me throw up the mashed baby food I'd just eaten. I couldn't open my mouth to even fit a spoon or straw in and couldn't curl my lips to suck on anything, so when I threw up, it poured out of my nose and my mouth without my control. I looked at my mom, dropped the vomit bowl in my lap, and signed "N-O-M-O-R-E-P-A-I-N-M-M-D-S," and I never took another pill again.

I told you. I am disciplined.

After three days, I only wanted one thing. Steak. My dad looked at me and asked me what I wanted, and I signed "S-T-E-A-K" for him. It was storming outside, and my dad only smiled and said, "you got it, Pook."

My father, bless the man, went outside, and cooked me a filet on the grille in a thunderstorm. My father has been struck by lightning three times. He will not go outside in a thunderstorm. He did for me.

He cut the bloody steak into slivers small enough to slide between the prongs of a fork, and I ate them. I used my hands and my tongue to push the steak to the back left side of my mouth, where I mashed it with my tongue against my teeth before swallowing. It took me three hours, but I ate the whole thing.

I still eat slowly because of this and don't chew as much as I should.

I didn't want to see any of the people that came to visit me, and some of them I didn't even know. I only looked forward to the end of every school day when Elizabeth would come to see me. Her mom would come and drop her off or stay for a few hours just to talk to my mom. I can't imagine what my mom was thinking or what she felt. I only remember what she looked like and when she wouldn't look at me.

I remember shuffling to the bathroom in our sunroom past the kitchen with the help of my mom the first day I was home from the hospital. I looked in the mirror and huffed a chuckle as I slurred with mostly just my tongue, “not as bad as I thought.” I tried



and my mouth without my control. I looked at my mom, dropped the vomit bowl in my lap, and signed “N-O-M-O-R-E-P-A-I-N-M-M-D-S,” and I never took another pill again.

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my best to make a funny face, but my eyes mostly just twitched, and I heard my mom laugh.

All I wanted was for her to laugh.

I refused to stay in my room while I was recovering and spent most of my time on the couch. My middle sister, Meghan, lent me her Wii while she was away at college, so I would have something to do other than watch TV alone or wait for the visitors I didn't want to see. My oldest sister, Amanda, had a Wii with her in medical school in Florida, and every day, she would race home after class to get on her Wii, call me on the house phone, and we would play Mario Kart until she had to go study. We played on any online server we could find, most of them Japanese, and it is still one of my fondest memories with my sister. She never missed a day, and I am sure she cancelled many plans to go back to her dorm room alone and play Mario Kart with her little sister and ten random Japanese boys.

I missed school for about a week after the accident. I am sure Dr. Roden and my mother would've loved for me to stay home longer, but that was all I could take. I missed my friends, recess, schoolwork, and my teachers. I remember walking into my classroom on a Friday to take my spelling test, my math test, and my vocab test for the week, and the room fell silent. I wasn't shy, but I froze where I stood in the doorway. My teachers inhaled and pulled their hands to their faces, tears in their eyes, and I looked around the room. My classmates had just been released from circle that morning and were taking their places around the room at tables and on mats to work on their workplans until it was time for their tests. Elizabeth, Nick, Chase, and Monica saw me and jumped from the booth in the back of the room, stepping on papers and workbooks as they ran for me.

They crashed into me.

They didn't care about my swollen and nearly unrecognizable face or the drool dripping down my chin from the inability to close my mouth and the numbness that is still there after nearly thirteen years. I let out a laugh when they hit me, and I stumbled back. I wasn't strong or sturdy anymore. My mom went to catch me, but my friends had me. When I stayed upright, the room finally took a breath. Thirty kids erupted in the room with cheers at my return, and after many hugs, they went back to their work, and I took my seat at the booth with my friends. All day teachers from other classrooms and younger kids that I played with in other classes came to see me.

My friend Chase, and childhood boyfriend in the sixth grade, started keeping tissues in his pockets to wipe away the spit and blood that would ooze from my mouth and drip onto my page.



In seventh grade, I changed schools with Nick to the private school I would attend until graduating high school. The kids there didn't keep tissues in their pockets.

I spent the next several years undergoing surgery after surgery and took steroids to keep the swelling and infection down. They had the nasty side-effect of weight gain, and I stopped growing after the accident. The weight had nowhere to go.

I remember going to the mall with my mom in the seventh grade to find some new clothes. It was always a weekend ritual in our house that my sisters and I would go shopping with our mom every Saturday. We would have breakfast and then get dolled up and go out together. We would be gone until dinner and come in totting bags from all over and put on fashion shows for our dad. Our brother, David, was never too interested

in the fashion shows and would make himself scarce before someone asked him to zip a dress.

But this wasn't a Saturday. It was just me and my mom since all my siblings were gone, away at college.

We were in an Aeropostale dressing room, and nothing fit right. It was 2009, and I was five foot two, 120 pounds, and nothing was going to fit. I thought back to my friends, all tall and blonde or short and blonde. All skinny. All beautiful. Everything fit them.

They didn't have scars on their face that earned them the nickname "Joker," and they weren't fat. I wasn't — am still not — built like my mother. I am strong. I am built. I am thick with more than three c's. But it didn't matter how many people told me I was beautiful. It always came after the story of my accident, like my parents thought they needed to explain how I looked and why. Like I needed an explanation. Their friends, family members, or strangers would always respond with, "oh my gosh, well, you look beautiful considering everything that happened," or "you'd never know it. The surgeon did a great job." But those words that I craved — the words that I gnawed at like a dog from a chain — never came without that explanation.

I get it. My parents had a beautiful child. As a toddler, I looked like a china doll. My eyebrows rose in perfect thin arches "like they were painted on," as my aunt would say. I had dark brown ringlet curls and huge brown eyes with olive skin. I didn't have the blonde hair and blue eyes that were so common among toddlers — the very same eyes and hair that would be expected of me later in life.

Now, they had a damaged child. A scarred, wild-eyed, tomboy thing that wanted to play in the mud and beat the other boys at every sport you could name instead of the china doll everyone had expected.

I am built like my dad. I always have been. I have big strong legs, a broad torso, and strong arms. I don't bend and curve where you'd expect, and I don't have long, slender legs like my mother. I think my parents have always wanted me to look like my mother. Always expected that one day they would wake up and I would look just like her. I never did. I still don't.

But I remember that twelve-year-old girl standing in the Aeropostale dressing room with her mom remembering her friends and sobbing. She sobbed into her mom's shoulder and heard the concerned voices of the sales associates and other customers outside in the store, and she sobbed. Her mother looked at her with terrified green eyes and didn't know what to do.

She didn't have a single idea of how to help her little girl.

She tried to whisper words of encouragement, promises of a thinner future, but the tears kept coming. So, they left and didn't come back again.

The following week there was a box of Nutrisystem meals and bars waiting for that little girl when she got home from school.



When I was stepped on, I couldn't play sports for the rest of the year. I had been at basketball tryouts the morning of the accident and made it on the team. Unfortunately, I couldn't play until the end of the season in February, and the other team had to be very careful not to hit me. The rules of engagement were easy to negotiate with twelve-year-

old girls since there wasn't much at stake. But I didn't like the special treatment and just wanted to play.

When soccer season rolled around, my parents wanted me to take the season off to heal more. The determined little girl I was, was not about to let that happen. So, at my bi-weekly check-up at Dr. Rodden's office, I asked, "when can I play soccer again?" My mom looked at me, eyes wide and mouth tight. I was going to be in big trouble.

I'd begged my mom to ask the doctor when I could play again. I wasn't allowed to play in recess at school or participate in P.E., and I was starting to go stir crazy. I hadn't taken a season off from sports since I started playing at five, and losing Basketball was all I could manage to take.

My mom turned to Dr. Roden from her chair in the yellow exam room and said through gritted teeth, "I am sorry, Dr. Roden. I have tried to explain to her that she isn't ready to go back to playing for a while and that she has to be patient."

My anger started to bubble up. "I am tired of waiting! I want to play at school, and I want to play soccer this coming season. I am going to miss try-outs!" I turned toward Dr. Roden and pleaded with him. "Please! Tell her I can play!"

He sighed and pushed his black glasses back up his nose. He closed his eyes, folded his arms across his chest, pinching his white coat in the back, and pursed his lips. He was going to make this face at me a lot for the next thirteen years.

He opened his eyes and began, "Here's the thing, Meridith, you cannot get hit in the face. All of your bones are too fragile to take any damage, and we don't want to do anything to risk those teeth that we are going to be transplanting soon." My mom turned to me, clutching her purse in her lap. Her eyes were turning greener by

the second, which told me she was getting pissed and I was going to get an earful in the car. “See? I told you. It is too dangerous right now.” She clipped.

“Well, hang on now,” Dr. Roden interjected, and I stopped breathing. “If you can promise to take care and wear not only a mouthguard and a face mask while you play, then we can also maybe work something out.”

“Deal,” I said, smiling. I was nearly vibrating.

“Meridith —” my mom started, “you can’t play soccer with a face mask.” I turned towards her and said, “I can, and I will.”

She knew right there that there was no point in fighting me anymore. She sighed, “fine.”

Afterward, we spent the next two months fitting mouthguards for my malformed jaw and missing teeth. It had to be thick enough to protect my teeth from any real impact and my jaw from clanking together if I hit the ground, but it also had to be thin enough so I could breathe. On top of that, I had to find a face mask that I could wear in a contact sport that didn’t pose any real threat to myself or the other people on the field. My mom searched the athletic stores for weeks and finally came back with a clear and black softball mask that pitchers wore to prevent them from getting hit in the face with a ball from the batter.

The mask was clear and strapped around my head. It caged around my mouth so a ball couldn’t get anywhere near me. There was padding across my forehead, down my cheekbones, and on my chin to keep the mask in place and protect me from impact. The mask combined with the mouthguard made for a ridiculous-looking headpiece, but I didn’t care. I could play.

I put up a fight a few times. I didn't want to wear the mask or the mouthguard because I couldn't talk, it was hard to see the ball, and my asthma wasn't the best already. However, it was either wear the stupid mask or not play at all. After a few weeks, I suffered in silence.

Once I was cleared to play, we had another challenge to face. We had to get the mask approved by the state to wear in the game. We had to take the mask to the referee headquarters and the headquarters for the Alabama Youth Soccer Association so they could deem the equipment safe enough to wear. We had to provide a written letter from Dr. Roden stating exactly why I was required to wear the headgear and probably had to divulge enough medical information to violate some HIPPA law. My mother also had to go before both associations and make a case for me. She convinced both boards that my facemask was no more a risk or danger than ACL braces that were already present in women's youth soccer.

She won.

I remember stepping out onto the field for the first time for club soccer. The parents were cheering my name and my teammates were laughing and screaming.

"Go, Meridith!" erupted from our side of the field. I pushed the mask down over my face and popped in my mouthguard as I walked over to the center circle and took up my position at the bottom. I was poised and ready. The whistle blew, the team touched the ball, and I was on them. I was finally home.

## NOTES ON MY FOOD LOG FOR MY THERAPIST

She calls me  
home  
to press my chest  
bruised against  
porcelain alters.  
Cold  
skin shivers  
with searing sweat  
as I stare  
open-mouthed  
into this basin.  
My hands clasped  
behind my head,  
a bastardized  
prayer for  
release.  
I am girdled in  
three hour soccer  
practices and  
daddy pulling the  
rice to  
the other side  
of the table.  
The snapping  
force of a



carrot sounds  
like the curling  
separation of  
my hamstring  
from the summer  
I only ate  
blueberries.  
I am leashed  
to the crisping  
oil on Christmas  
morning with  
her finger  
down my throat  
and the  
satisfaction  
of liver  
cramps and  
brown urine.  
She follows me.  
She says,  
I *care*. But  
the look in  
her eyes –  
my eyes  
our eyes,  
we whisper,  
*I'm still fat.*

## REMINISCING ON 16

*March 2012*

When I “signed” on as one of Lorenzo’s players, I was so excited. Since freshman year, I spent most of high school soccer and club soccer miserable, but for very different reasons. I was the star of my high school team, like most phenomenal players who go on to play college. When I stepped on the field, the other team got nervous.

My high school team wasn’t the best, and it was very small. Most of the girls I played club with played at other schools ranging from 3A to 6A. Their schools were bigger, their programs were better, and they won the state championships and awards. My school was 2A, and we did all right for our bracket, but we weren’t anything compared to them, and that was what made me miserable.

I wanted to win. I wanted to be the best.

Regardless of our size, we played schools from all over the state in all divisions, so I often had to play girls on my club team, and they all warned their coaches and teammates about me. I was strong, fast, aggressive, and intelligent. If I got the ball and three defenders came at me, more often than not, I left with the ball at my feet and sprinting towards the goal. I stepped on the field and watched my friends on both teams take deep breaths.

I had this thing that I did where I always rolled up my sleeves and tucked them up around my shoulders during a game. When this happened, I meant business, and all

mercy was gone. These girls weren't my friends for the next 90 minutes, and I wouldn't treat them as such. They were obstacles in my way, and I wouldn't be stopped.

In my first high school game my freshman year, I scored off a corner kick. A ricochet came to my feet at the top of the box, and I was more than ready. I was stationed floating between the box and half field as a security measure. If the other team got the ball, I was supposed to stall them for my team to get back or chase them down the field if they took off. There wasn't a single girl that I couldn't catch.

I was also stationed there like a shark, constantly moving and constantly waiting. If a ball came out to me, I was to put it back in play or put it on frame.

This first game was against a bigger and better team than us, and I was a substitute, as most first-year students are, and playing center-mid, the worst position. It requires too much running, too many people, and you have to cover too much slack from both offense and defense. I have never envied a single one of my friends that played this position on the regular.

It was an evening game, and the sidelines were filled with parents, students, and the men's teams from both schools. I subbed in on the corner and took my place pacing and jumping. My heart pounded in my chest, and my breaths shook. I was ready. I vibrated with power, with strength, with purpose.

My outside back took the kick, and the ball pinged around the box and eventually rolled out to me. The other team rushed as me, and I settled in my skin. Their midfielder took a jab at me, intending to slam into me, but I was faster. Much faster.

I dodged her attack and cut around her in a sharp motion. I pushed the ball in front of me and saw the opening I needed. I shot, and the ball sped through the other team and

megged a defender on its way through. The keeper didn't have time to move as my 30-yard missile blasted into the lower corner of the goal.

My team erupted in cheer as Coach Matt jumped up, screaming in joy. We were up 1-0. I sprinted on the field, jumping and screaming. I turned my back to the fans and shook the back of my jersey at them. The freshman, number 2, was here, and this was only the beginning. They screamed louder, and I saw my parents' smile.

My mom's teeth beamed, and her cheeks were full of joy. She gave me thumbs up and mouthed, "awesome, that's my girl."

I jogged back to our side for kick-off. I took my position between and behind our forwards on the outside of the circle in a direct line for the ball. I poised myself in a sprinter's pose, looked up under my eyebrows, dug my toes into the ground — another habit I would create for myself, like a racehorse pawing the ground before gunfire — and rolled my sleeves. The referee blew the whistle, and I took off.



This was the start of my high school career. We would go on to lose players to graduation injury or the sad fact that 62% of girls drop out of sports by high school. The athletes dwindled around me, and I grew more frustrated. I wouldn't have any high school state trophies under my name. I wouldn't play on the All-Star teams because we wouldn't win enough games. I would lose respect for my coach, and my frustration would grow. I would have to outscore the other teams, and my body would suffer the abuse. Every year, I would win MVP and the Golden Boot. Every year, I would scale the ranks for Center Forwards in the state.

In my senior year of high school, I scored at least a hattrick for the last seven games in a row out of sixteen. It still wasn't enough.

## **SIGNING MY SOUL AWAY TO THE DEVIL – I MEAN LORENZO**

*December 2014*

I remember saying yes. I remember sitting in my favorite Chinese restaurant with my boyfriend at the time. I remember you were at a Christmas party when I dialed your number. I remember telling you, “I would love to come and play for you. I would love to be a part of your family.” I remember your laughter.

I could see your smile with big round cheeks covered by grey and white hair. You reminded me of a grandfather or even Santa Claus. Maybe that’s why I don’t really like Christmas anymore. I gave my life away to you at Christmas.

I almost said no. I remember that. I remember deliberating and hesitating about something. I didn’t know then, and I still don’t know why now. I can’t remember what didn’t sit right, but I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to be yours the way a dog is to a master or a horse to a jockey. Something about the place was just wrong. Something about you was wrong.

The restaurant was packed, and the low hum of voices and the sharp pitches of laughter mixed like a cocktail buzzing around my head. I was glancing from the giant ink-brushed painting behind Matthew’s head. My eyes traced the mountain range, and across the characters in a language I didn’t understand, but somehow, I knew it was beautiful. The canvas was glossed behind the glass the way all adorned Chinese paintings are, and it reminded me of the hot tea steaming in my cup beside me. We had

been there for twenty minutes when Matthew put his phone down and looked at me, finally noticing that I wasn't paying much attention to anything but the giant painting behind his head. His ice-blue eyes studied me closely. I shifted my gaze down to stare back at him. My river rock eyes a silent challenge to acknowledge the pain roaring there, the confusion, and the desperation for his advice. The yellow lines around his pupils just looked back, bored and unmoved.

The menus were closed on the left side of the booth table. We never needed to look at them. We came here at least once a week, and we always ordered the same thing. Dado sauntered out from the kitchen to take our orders. After writing it all down, he read back: "two egg rolls, hot and sour soup for one, chicken fried rice, and honey walnut chicken." He paused and looked up at me, "Anything else?"

I smiled slightly, "no, thank you so much."

He nodded and smirked, "you're welcome so much."

Dado and I had a running joke that I overly thanked him for every little thing he did. So, one day he decided to start welcoming me just as emphatically as I thanked him. It never failed to get me to laugh at least a little, but not that night. I wonder whatever happened to Dado. After the pandemic, I never saw him again. I hope he didn't die. I still go to the restaurant around once every two weeks, but with a new boy with new blue eyes.

A few minutes passed, and our egg rolls arrived with his soup and some sweet and sour sauce. The orange sauce rolled around in the saucer thicker than cough medicine, but you will never have something so good on your eggroll. Matthew looked up at me as he slurped his soup, "So, you want to tell me what's bothering you?" He was mildly

concerned with my well-being and trying his best to engage with the riptide rushing through my mind. I was being sucked away to dark thoughts and deep places. If I didn't pull myself in, I wasn't coming back for a long time.

I said, "Berry sent me a message saying they want me to come and play for them. They called and left me a message a few days ago." There was no expected excitement in my voice from someone who was just offered to play soccer at a collegiate level. There was just something not right. I wasn't scared or nervous. It was just that some deeper part of me was telling me that it was a bad idea and that more offers would come if I just waited a little longer.

"You should take it," his low voice thrummed between slurps. "You don't know if anyone else will offer you anything, and you've already turned down your division one offers and ignored a lot of your D2s."

"Thank you for the reminder," I said with more bite than intended.

"Why don't you want to go? I thought your parents loved it and when you visited you had a blast. You said the team and the coach were nice, and you felt like you could find a real family there."

"I don't know" was all I said back as I stuffed the egg roll into my mouth.

My mom did love the school, even if I didn't play soccer. Berry College was and still is one of the most beautiful campuses in the country. I went on a trip to see the school with my dad after a tournament one weekend. My mom was so jealous that she practically glowed as green as her eyes. It was all she talked about for months. I can remember hearing her, "If I were going to school again, I would go here."



“I don’t know. It’s all right, but something is off,” was my reply in the car as I looked out the window. We finally took a trip up to Rome after visiting Oglethorpe in Atlanta.

“What is wrong with you?” she laughed and glanced at me like I was caked in mud and sitting on her white carpet.

“I guess you’re right.” I sighed.

I came to as Matthew was asking me if I had the coach’s contact number.

“Well,” he impatiently pushed, “do you have it?”

I nodded as he pulled me from memory.

“So, call him if you want to play. You are going to run out of time.”

The more we talked about it, the more right it seemed at the time. My, whatever I was feeling, faded away, and I felt secure in my feelings.

I wanted this. I wanted this team, this school, this coach. I wanted a team I could trust and count on. I wanted a team that loved me and wanted me back. I was so tired from coaches that abused me and mistreated me. I just wanted someone to see me for the player I was and accept me for it. I wanted someone to see me for once.

“Besides,” Matthew said between mouthfuls of chicken, “if the whole writing thing doesn’t work out, don’t they have a great nursing program? You could always do that.”

So, I picked up my phone, and I called.

The phone rang and rang. My palms started sweating. The voicemail picked up.

“Hello, you have reached Lorenzo Canals.” *Hang up the phone. Say it was the*

*wrong number and just hang up.* “I can’t come to the phone right now. But if you leave your name and number, I will get back to you shortly.”

*HANG UP THE PHONE!*

BEEP.

“Hello, Coach Canals?” I swallowed so hard I might as well have been trying to swallow a jawbreaker whole. “This is Meridith Beretta, from Birmingham, Alabama. I was calling to say that if you are still interested, I would love to come and play for you at Berry and be a member of the Vikings family. Give me a call back at this number whenever you get a chance. Merry Christmas.”

I hung up the phone.

“No answer?” Matthew asked.

“No.” was all I said as I picked up my fork to start eating.

A few minutes passed, and my phone buzzed on the table next to me. Without thinking, I grabbed it and turned it over. I read it and dropped my fork.

LORENZO CANALIS: Hi Meridith! I am at a Christmas party right now, but I just got your message! We would love for you to be a member of our team. I will call you tomorrow so we can talk about the details! Merry Christmas!

I pulled my sleeves around my hands and covered my mouth. Tears welled up in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks. The other people in the restaurant started to stare and whisper.

“What is it?” Matthew hushed at me.

“He said they want me.” was all I could muster as a response.

“That’s great! Congratulations! I will get us some Chinese donuts to celebrate!”

I was finally wanted.

At the time, I was wearing my ¼ zip grey sweatshirt with the pale blue Viking head on the left breast. There are so many pictures of me in that jacket. I can't look at it now. I can't look at any of my sweatshirts, t-shirts, or jerseys from that life now. I probably couldn't find this one even if I tried. I buried it so deep in one of the closets in my parents' house so I couldn't hear it laughing. So, I couldn't hear him laughing at me anymore.

## FLORENCE, ITALY CIRCA. JUNE 2018

During my junior year of college, the communications department reached out to me and asked if I would be interested in studying abroad over the summer to earn the last communication credits I needed for my journalism minor. I didn't think anything of the invitation at the time and let it float around in my inbox for about a week before mentioning it to my parents.

After practice, I was driving back to my townhouse across campus and called my parents. I am sure that I was calling to either tell them that I had a terrible practice that day or that I actually enjoyed myself with minimal verbal abuse from Zo on the rare occasion that practice went that well happened anymore.

"That sounds like a great opportunity! Have you told your dad yet?" My mom's voice crackled through my poor reception.

"No, I wasn't seriously considering doing it. I just thought it was funny. Wait — do you think I should do it?"

"I mean—yeah? Why wouldn't you do it?"

I laughed, "uh, because it's expensive?" I couldn't believe they were considering this and entertaining the idea that I would study abroad.

"Where is it?" My dad's voice shot through my mom's chuckled response.

"Florence, Italy," I said quickly. I didn't know he had been home and listening to

the conversation or that I was on speaker.

“How much?” He sounded like he was throwing peanuts in his mouth on the other side of the kitchen. They must’ve been getting ready for dinner, which meant dad was eating a snack before he started cooking. Soon the kitchen fan would be going, and it would be too loud. My mom would hang up the phone with an “all right. I can’t hear you anymore. Let me let you go, honey.”

“Um, I think about three or five thousand. I can’t really remember. It’s a lot, though, so I wasn’t really considering going.” I spoke quickly and softly. My father is a wonderful man and would do anything for his family but primarily for his children. If I acted like I wanted to go more than anything in the world, he would make it happen. If I acted like it was too much, then the decision would be his, and I would feel less guilty. I couldn’t pay for this. He would have to, and I would feel guilty that I took too much.

The sound of pans clattering came through the phone, and I hit a pothole in the road. I do that a lot.

“We can do that. Tell them you are going.” He was short and precise. My dad didn’t really speak unless he had a lot to say, but he was always quiet and kind when speaking. He just didn’t say very much, only what was needed. He’s like pepper in a dish. You only add as much as you need and no more, or it’s all you can taste. He never wanted to be the only voice in a conversation or the only presence in a room. He likes balance. I am more like garlic, a lot and measured with the heart. My mom is vodka.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course, I am sure.” I heard the sound of him chopping vegetables.

“I wouldn’t say anything if I wasn’t sure. Tell them you are going.”

My mom popped into the connection, “Well, there ya go. Figure out the payment plan and let us know.”

I was shocked and hit another pothole. “Shit—”

“What was that?” My mom asked, “Did you hit a deer?” Berry students like to say that the deer outnumber the students by 3:1. It isn’t true, but it lets visitors know just how many deer to look out for.

“No,” my dad said, “she probably hit another pothole.”

“Yeah, I hit a pothole. Thank you guys so much. You really don’t have to do this.” I didn’t know how to express my gratitude in a way that they would understand or register. The thank-you never felt like enough.

“Don’t worry about it,” and dad cleared his throat as he flicked on the fan, and the sound of oil started popping on the stove.

There it was, the end of the conversation—my mom started, “Okay, honey. Well, your dad just started cooking, and I can’t hear you anymore, so I’m going to have to let you go. I’ll check on you later about practice. Have a good night. We love you.”

“Okay, thank you again. I love you guys too.”

“Love you.”

“Love you. —bye.”

I pulled into a spot in our small parking lot and just chuckled. I was going to study abroad in Italy. I laughed harder and pulled out my phone to text Matthew.

“I think I’m gonna study abroad in Italy over the summer!”

I grabbed my bags and started to get out of the car as my phone buzzed again. “Wow! Um, okay, let’s talk about it later? Congrats!”

“Sure. What time are you free?” I locked my car and started walking towards the house.

“I’ll text you. I don’t know yet.”

“Okay, I love you.”

“Love you”

I opened the door to my townhouse and found all my roommates, Logan, Shelby, and Savannah, in the common area, talking about what they wanted for dinner. Logan beat me home from the field because she had a study group soon. We usually rode together well after freshman year. We didn’t then.

“Guys! I am going to Italy to study abroad in the summer!” I shouted as I walked into the living room.

“NO WAY!”

“That’s awesome!”

“Congrats! when did this happen?”

They all ran to hug me and laughed as I bounced toward them. I was going to Italy—to Florence. I didn’t know it yet, but I was going home.



Fast forward to the next semester, Spring 2018, and I am sitting in a soccer meeting for spring workouts. The entire team is sitting in one kinesiology classroom in the cage, our school’s gymnasium, and the location of all the athletic department offices, health sciences classrooms, and the major athletic training facilities for athletes. I hated

this place. When I was there, it was a bright building with a lot of windows and always smelled like cleaner and the familiar smells of a gymnasium. I can't imagine much has changed. A lot of my friends worked the front desk or were trainers in the free-weights section of the gym, so I was there often. I also had to lift weights there for spring season workouts, usually. This spring season, I wouldn't be participating with the team. I was on probation for failing the spring fitness test, me and one other girl named Kelsey. It wasn't a surprise that we failed, at least not to us. Lorenzo and G had this method of playing most of the same players for 90 minutes, and if you were on his shit list, you weren't getting on the field, or if you did, it was the last ten minutes when he had already given up hope of winning the game. We call this a pity position.

Pity positions functioned a little differently for me. I played in most games save for a few, but Lorenzo would pull me out for no reason or wouldn't tell me the reason, or he would put me in for the last five minutes and tell me to go score a goal cold off the bench and already in my head. Lorenzo needed me, even when I was already in my head, so he played me because I could usually make something happen in the game, whether it be a change of pace, a goal, or an assist. Sometimes, I could even draw the defenders or other teams to me just enough for my teammates to play. Lorenzo would never acknowledge my benefit to the team unless he needed me for something.

If you were one of the unlucky players on the team who didn't play a specific number of minutes—designated by Lorenzo—you were punished the next practice with fitness. He believed that we needed to remain as fit as the other team members who played 90-minute games, and we had control over how much we played. We didn't. He did. I've never seen a more perfect example of gaslighting in my life. The players who



played for 90 minutes would rest for the entire practice by doing functional movements and yoga with the trainer. The rest of us ran for the first half and then scrimmaged for the remainder. Those who played between 45 and 89 minutes were let off throughout practice to go stretch with the golden players. The rest of us were left to scrimmage. The next practice would be back to normal. No rest for us. This was Zo's way of creating competition between players for spots, but he never gave the ones who did the fitness and the punishments the chance. He created so much anxiety in us that we had already lost as soon as we hit the field. The mental battle of sports is the most important, and if you lose that, you lose the game.



I learned after a couple of seasons to not ask Lorenzo why I was pulled off the field after receiving a few of his favorite responses, “you should already know Beretta,” “I don't even want to speak to you. Go sit down,” or my personal favorite, the silent treatment where he would look at his clipboard and sigh as I walked past. I started walking over to our assistant coach, G, when I would get pulled off the field if he was away from Lorenzo.

“What did I do wrong? I thought I was doing what he asked?” I asked between sips of water.

“Honestly, I don't know. I'll try to figure it out, but just keep warm and drink some water, and I will see if he'll tell me anything.” G would sigh, look down and walk towards Lorenzo, a pat on my back as he passed.

I really liked G. He was fair and had high expectations, but instead of instilling crippling anxiety, he made me want to work hard for him because he worked hard for

me. He was my coach and my friend. Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of times that he ripped my head off in practice or games, but they were far more deserved and few and far between. I loved when he ran practice. He asked me how my family was doing, how school was going, and how I was doing. He was a coach. G doesn't coach at Berry anymore. Once Zo retired, G was passed for the new head coach position, so he left the school and moved on. I was always sad for him for that. I think he could have done wonders for the program. The new coach that replaced Zo was a former player of Berry, like G, but she had a brand-new way of coaching. But I will get to that later.

After a couple of seasons of Zo's abuse and G's attempts to play intermediary, G stopped trying as hard. I guess he and Zo go into enough fights over me that it stopped being worth the pain—I stopped being worth it.



So here I was, sitting on the far-right side of the cage classroom, out of Lorenzo's direct line of sight, with a few other misfits on the team sitting with me. They still hadn't given up trying to impress Lorenzo and win his favor. After all, I was still on the team, and I was still his main target. Kelsey and I were allowed to come to team meetings but not to practices or team events. We had to practice together or alone but not with the rest of the team, or they would be punished as well for trying to help us get better. I'm not sure what his thought process for this was, considering he wanted us to be a family. He wanted the team to be connected and unified, but all he did was create dissension. The golden players were too afraid to become like us that they distanced themselves and ganged up on the players already getting punished by Lorenzo. Mob mentality is like that.

The meeting proceeded as usual. They covered recruits that were coming to visit, what workouts were scheduled for, what day when team dinners would be, what the GPA expectations were, and when the team meetings would be. This is where I had to speak up. At Berry, no one had class from 11:00 am – 12:30 pm every Tuesday and Thursday. It was a break for students and faculty on the days when classes were 1 hour and 15 minutes all day long. This also gave a break in the day where everyone would be available for meetings or whatever else. Except I wasn't available, I had my class to prepare me for study abroad for that exact reason. We were all available. I spoke up, "I can't meet then. I have class."

And before I could specify what it was for, Zo interrupted me, "You don't have class then, Beretta. No one does." He looked to the rest of the team, "Am I right, or have I had a stroke with my heart attack?" They all nodded in agreement with murmured "Yeahs" and glares directed at me. I could hear them, "Why is she lying?"

The people around me shrieked away.

"I have a class for study abroad at that time because we were all available," I said. "I have the email to prove it." I pulled up the email and showed him, "See?"

"Huh, well, fine. I guess we will have to find another time." He handed the phone back to me and looked away. Later on, he would use the fact that I was studying abroad in Italy as a commonality between the two of us since he was from Italy and moved to the U.S. when he was in college. I fell for it, of course, just wanting something to have in common so he would leave me alone. It wasn't enough.



The study abroad classes were fun. It was a lot of “don’t do this” and “don’t say this” and “how not to appear as a tourist.” This was all stuff that I already knew, and I was the only one who had been to Italy before, so I was familiar with the customs and general public rules. I helped the professors get their points across a lot of the time. I am also very Italian, so a lot of this was common practice in my own family.

We left for Italy the first week of June and would be back at the beginning of July. Four weeks. I would be gone for four weeks, and I wasn’t going to want to come back. The professors had us all take the same flights to Italy so we could all go together. We had to meet up in Atlanta, which was fine for everyone except me and another girl Haley. She was from Virginia, and I had to come from Birmingham, Alabama. Her family sent her from Virginia with a big to-do, and she met us outside the international airport. My mom was out of town when I was supposed to leave. She was either in Texas caring for my very pregnant sister or in Fairhope planning my cousins’ baby shower. I don’t remember very clearly, only that it had to do with babies. My mom was distraught that she couldn’t see me off. She texted me nearly constantly. “I love you. Don’t be nervous. You are going to have so much fun.” I smiled at my phone all morning.

My dad drove me to the Atlanta airport at four in the morning to make it there by six. My dad backpacked through Europe several times as a young adult, so he knows several languages and all the best places to eat if they are still open. But as I said, he isn’t a very talkative man. He had one clear message for me, though, as we pulled up to the curb at the airport.

He stopped the car and looked at me, “You can be anyone you want here. No one knows you. You can do and say what you want and create your own story. No one there will know you. Use that to your advantage. Become who you want to be.”

I looked back at my father with his big brown eyes and olive skin. He was wearing his typical blue jeans with a hard rocks t-shirt and driving shoes. I knew what he meant. I didn’t know who I was without soccer, and I didn’t know who I was without my family or my boyfriend. I had tried to become what they wanted, and none of it fit quite right. I chafed under their molds and shed the dead skin leaving myself raw and exposed.

“I will, daddy,” I said quietly.

“Okay. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I got out of the car and pulled my backpack and purse on, and slid my two bags out of the car. Since my mom bought me all new linen and “European” outfits for my birthday, I needed a bigger one. They are still some of my favorite outfits.

I waved goodbye as my dad drove away.

I walked into the airport to find all of my classmates with their parents hugging goodbye and murmuring. Some of them even had siblings come, and then I saw Haley over by herself and walked over.

“No one to send you off, Haley?” I asked.

“No, my parents said goodbye in Virginia. It was a whole big thing.” She chuckled and smiled at the memory of her family from last night. She’d slept in the airport hotel.

“What about you?” She looked behind me, curious, and her brows furrowed.

“Nah, my dad dropped me off at the curb.” I readjusted my purse and placed my

backpack on the ground. I didn’t need a big send-off. I just needed my dad’s words. I would find out who I was underneath all of these expectations.

My time in Italy was the best time of my life. Florence felt natural to me, like I was meant to be there. My hometown has always required cars. Even to get to my friend’s house, I needed a car. It was too far to walk, and there was no way to get there via bike that wasn’t on a busy two-lane highway. Florence is a place for walking. I saw some cars, but they were mostly parked. I walked across town to my classes and stopped at my newfound favorite coffee shop called *Volume* along the way. The baristas there memorized my order by the end of the first week. My walk across the city was about thirty minutes every morning, and it became my favorite part of the day. My classmates and I arrived in Florence a couple of weeks before peak tourist season, so the initial few trips weren’t bombarded with tourists. We saw busy people on their way to work and kids on their way to school.

My feet and legs had to adjust to walking on cobblestone and bricks instead of concrete sidewalks. I wore two types of shoes while I lived in Florence, sandals and white high-top converse. Neither of which had a truly supportive sole, but that wasn’t the

point. I wanted to feel Florence beneath my feet. The roads there moved with the land instead of cutting through it, and I learned to walk in the history instead of on it.

My three roommates, Hannah, Shannon, and Jessica, lived in a two-bedroom apartment off a side street leading to the Piazza del Duomo. I walked past the magnificent building every single day. I was awoken by and lulled to sleep by the chiming of its bells. Funny that I lived next to one of the greatest monuments to Christianity and Catholicism, but I didn't feel the weight of its existence in this city. At home, I chafed against religion. I don't like it, and I didn't while living in Florence either, but the air around it was different here. I didn't feel the weight of my lost faith even as I scaled the steps to the top of the dome. Every breath was lighter than the last despite all of the cigarette smoke wafting in through the hot summer air.

It took me about three days to learn the route to class through the piazzas and across the Ponte Saint Trinita to the Piazza Santo Spirito, home of Michelangelo's *Crucifix* crafted for the church when he was seventeen, in exchange for anatomical studies of corpses brought from the covenant hospital. In a few days, you couldn't spot me in a crowd of native Florentines. No one ever assumed I spoke English; in fact, it was usually the fourth language people chose when speaking to me after Italian, Spanish, and French. I looked like I belonged, and I acted like I belonged.

Soon my roommates couldn't keep up with my pace when walking to and from class, and I would often end up in the streets alone, wandering around looking for farmers' markets and little old women willing to teach me Italian. I learned the language basics quickly and could soon order at restaurants, converse at the grocery stores and pharmacies, and purchase train tickets to explore more of the country.

After being in Florence for two weeks, I organized a trip for some of my class to visit Monterosso Del Mar, a city at the top of the Cinque Terre, accessible by a couple-hour train ride. Those that didn't come went to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a trip I didn't deem worth the time since I'd been before. We left early in the morning, and all met at the train station. We'd never taken the train alone, and everyone relied on me to get us there safely and ask for help if we needed it.

I did a decent job despite misunderstanding the intercom on the train about what stop we were at, and we got off one stop early. A couple of girls panicked, "what are we going to do? We only have tickets to get home again!" I sighed at their dramatics, "we can either ask the information desk for help or wait for the next train to come by and see where the screen says it is going."

"But what if they won't let us on the train because we have the wrong tickets?" Ashley stared at me wide-eyed from the staircase leading down to the information desk. Ashley was the type of girl who couldn't do anything without having absolutely every moment planned out and had to have at least two alternatives for any moment something could go wrong. No adventure within her.

"No one will check our tickets," Bailey chimed in, "and if they do, we will just tell them we got confused and got off at the wrong stop." I turned around and gave Bailey a half-smile of thanks. Since freshman year math class, Bailey had been my friend and had never missed a moment to be one of my best friends I'd ever had but also the biggest pain in my ass I've ever had.

Bailey was about five foot eight or nine with short sandy brown hair and big brown eyes. His lean and muscled frame was always pleasing to me. We were the kind of



friends that flirted constantly, but nothing ever came from it. It was just a way for us to show our affection with little consequences. Bailey had a huge smile and a mischievous laugh that never led to anything good happening, and I usually had to drag him out of whatever mess he made. He winked at me and chuckled.

I rolled my eyes and looked back at Ashley and her new BFF for the trip, Brooke, and said, “if you are that worried, go and ask the desk, but I am not going down there when the train should be here in 20ish minutes.” They disappeared down the stairs with the sound of flip-flops echoing back up. I’d suggested maybe they wear something a little less touristy but apparently, that was all they had with their denim shorts and tank tops. They were going to make us stick out like a sore thumb. Call me a snob, that’s fine, but they never looked like they belonged.

I turned away and yawned as the sound of their stomping and flopping disappeared into the tunnel. Everyone else slept on the train up here and would probably do so again when we boarded the next train.

“You tired?” a soft voice came up behind me, Sean. On this trip, Sean was quickly becoming my partner in crime, and I enjoyed his company immensely. Bailey got into trouble a lot and nearly failed the courses on the trip for treating it like a vacation instead of class and not doing his schoolwork. Sean was a happy medium between the two of us and was always ready for a good time, but he never looked for trouble. Sean was Italian like me, and we looked like we could be related, both with dark olive skin from the sun, shorter, athletic builds, dark hair, and dark eyes. When we walked around Florence and Rome together, no one gave us a second glance until we spoke English to each other.

“Yeah, a little. I didn’t sleep on the train.” I replied and shifted my weight under my backpack, twisting away from Sean’s arm brushing against mine. He also had no personal space, just like me. I only twisted away out of habit to avoid Matthew’s looks, a behavior so ingrained in me that it became an adverse second nature even when he wasn’t there. It didn’t seem to bother Sean, and Bailey downright ignored it.

Bailey came up to my other side, “when we head home, tell us what stop we need to get off at so you can rest. We can’t depend on you for everything.” I laughed and nodded my head. Ashley and Brooke came up the stairs to stand next to Shannon and Jessica, waiting on the platform, “We can wait up here. They said we don’t need new tickets and just get on the train.”

I nodded. I didn’t feel the need to say I told you so, and we waited for the train.

After getting to the beach, we rented a few chairs and spread out our stuff.

We’d

already been to a beach further south called Viareggio, surrounded by snowcapped mountains and crystal-clear water. That beach had white sand and warm waves.

Monterosso was as far north as you could get up the Cinque Terre and the seas turned colder, and the sand reformed into rocks. The native Europeans wore water shoes to brave the sharp stones to reach the water, but we Americans were left to wince and groan trying to get to the cold waves.

I am at peace in the ocean. The feeling of weightlessness soothes me into a meditative breath, and the pull of the tide takes my aches and pains along with it and

swallows it whole. After swimming around for a while, Sean, Bailey, and I went down the beach and found a cliff and at the top of said cliff was a restaurant. Sean and Bailey immediately went to climb the rocks, searching for the perfect place to jump off. They asked me to dive down and see how far we were from the bottom. I tried but couldn't reach it and deduced that they would be fine to jump. I watched them jump twice before I felt a weird pit in my stomach begin to form. The cold surf was finally starting to stiffen my limbs, and the depths below me began to reach for my ankles. I kept spinning in circles, looking for something to appear behind me to drag me down.

As my anxiety increased, I stopped paying attention to the waves, but they were pushing me close and closer to the rocks of the cliff. I was getting knocked against them, and I couldn't get away. Sean and Bailey were too busy laughing to notice, but once they jumped in again, they asked if I would join them.

“No. I am afraid of heights.” I said, fighting my teeth from chattering.

“Oh, come on,” Bailey laughed. “You'll never get a chance like this again.”

Sean laughed alongside him and clung to the rocks above my head. Bailey had

already passed him and was headed for the ledge. I shook my head again.

“Well, I guess you might not be strong enough to climb the rocks anyway. It is pretty hard, and we climb pretty often.” Sean smirked and turned to continue climbing.

That was it, and he knew it. He said the exact right thing to piss me off.

I grabbed onto the rocks and used the push of the next wave to lift myself out of the water. It felt like the waves wanted me to climb. The sea wanted me to let go. It

wanted me to be free. I started to climb, but my feet slipped on the barnacles and nearly sliced my little toes off of each foot. I inhaled a sharp breath, “fuck.”

Sean turned around and looked shocked. I guess he didn't think his taunting would work as quickly as it did. Bailey whooped as I slipped again. They both started to descend the rocks to help me. They held onto the ledge and dropped their feet, determined to give me something that wouldn't slip against my pruned fingers and bloody toes.

I shoved their feet away, “I don't need your help.” I slipped a third time.

“Ouch!”

“Are you sure?” Sean asked. I could see his dark brows furrowing, and concern crept across his mouth as he bit his lip.

“Come on, take a foot. Let us help you, so you don't die! Bailey said, trying to convince me.

“No!” I said with more force this time. I huffed a breath and climbed again. The boys pulled themselves up and waited for me on the ledge. I crawled over it, gasping, and they wrapped their hands under my armpits to pull me up. I laughed, sweating and shaking.

“I told you I didn't need help.”

“Yeah, well, call us overprotective.” Sean laughed.

“Look at you! You did it! We barely made it, and you did it all yourself!” Bailey cheered and hit me on the back.

Sure, I was up the cliff, but how was I going to get down? I was terrified of heights, and there was no way in Hell I would be jumping twenty feet to the water's surface.

I'd barely caught my breath as I stood and backed up to the sharp black rocks behind me. "Okay, spider monkey, you're up first." Bailey reached out his hand, smiling and waiting for me to take it.

I shook my head.

"You climbed all the way up here, and now you won't jump?" Sean laughed and crossed his arms on his hips. I watched him and the water drip off his short black hair.

"You are correct. I wanted to prove I could climb it, and I did." I dug my hands into the rock behind me, and my nails scraped the pore-spotted surface.

"Oh, come on." Bailey stepped towards me and grabbed me by the waist.

"Bailey, if you throw me, I will bring you with me and land on you. Then I am going to drown you." I cut my eyes to him and pushed back.

He let go and raised his hands, "ok, ok. How about you watch us and then try yourself?"

My face relaxed a little.

"That's my girl," and his crooked grin popped back up.

Then he stepped off the rock. I screamed, and he laughed the whole way down.

Sean looked at me with soft eyes and chuckled as he took off in a run. I heard the splash and looked down as he burst through the surface, smiling and waving.

They started shouting at me to jump.

I froze again. I couldn't do it. I was afraid of heights. I couldn't believe how stupid I had been to climb up here with no way down. I started shaking again, and this time, it wasn't from the cold.

Then I heard shouting from further off. A group of guys were on a private boat and yelling at me to jump. I caught a few words of their Italian, and for whatever reason, they thought flattery would get me to jump. Then I heard English voices from above and saw the restaurant above us. A man shouted, "you can do it! Just jump already! Stop wasting everybody's time."

I saw red.

I turned around and looked at the ledge. I backed up to the rocks as far as I could and took off the short eight feet to the edge. I leaped as far away from the rocks as possible, and a scream escaped me as I plummeted towards the water. I tucked my knees into my chest as the water approached and crashed into the waves. Bailey was already scaling the cliffside when I surfaced, and Sean was wading in the water next to me. I heard cheers from everyone, and I smiled.

I darted for the cliffs again, and this time, I accepted the help from my friends. We climbed and jumped for at least another hour.

We slowly sauntered across the beach towards our friends we left tanning after we swam back around the horn of the island. We collapsed onto the lounge, one on top of the other. We laughed as everyone else looked at us.

"Where did you guys go? We couldn't find you anymore." Shannon asked.

“Yeah, we walked the full length of the beach on this side and couldn’t find you anywhere.” Jessica agreed.

“We went cliff jumping,” Bailey said from under my shoulder.

“You did what?” Brook shouted.

“Oh, relax,” Sean waved his hand. “We were fine. We even got Meridith to jump.”

The girls looked at me and my sunburnt nose, and I shrugged my shoulders and smiled.

We spent another hour on the beach, and I wandered back into the water. The chill left my skin, and the water felt welcoming and refreshing. I felt clean. Cleaner than I had in a very long time. I was open and raw for the Mediterranean, and for the first time in ten years, my genuine smile pushed past my mask and past my lips. I went to dive below the water again to be submerged in peace when Sean grabbed my arm and turned me around. I let my smile wash over him, and he just stared at me for a few long moments before a small smile came across his face, and he let go for me to dive again.

**TO DO: MONDAY NIGHT – VOYEURISM**  
*Me and Stu (Brushing Teeth)* Shona McAndrew

Her papier-mâché thumb pops the elastic band  
of his blue Hanes, as she cuspid-clamps her toothbrush.

She notices me, notices us all staring  
and watching – waiting – for an expected, “I love you.”

But this isn’t *V-J Day in Times Square*  
or Leander drowning at Hellespont.

It’s Monday night garlic bread breath  
and a small embrace because she avoided the mirror, again.

These layers of flour and water crushed  
together like his head was between her thighs an hour ago.

They dimple and ripple in this awful overhead  
light. We aren’t supposed to see them.

We aren’t supposed to see them, and  
here they are on display and us, unable to look away.

Some of us are thinking, “how did she let  
herself go”, with a smirk, proud.

I learned in second grade, you  
laugh at what you become

And when she looks at me, looking  
at her, I want to tell her

to fuck her boyfriend with the lights  
on and her shirt off.



But I can't say anything because  
we aren't supposed to be here

watching and waiting. Even if I could muster a  
noise, I wouldn't; she's only papier-mâché.

## A LESSON IN FEMININITY

*August 2020*

As a young girl, especially in the south, where football and God rule all, women struggle to find a place in sports — masculinity and femininity. My mom put bows in my hair and dressed me in frills and lace as a little girl. I was a china doll to be dressed and repainted for everyone to stare at and smile at. I ripped out the bows and pulled off the dresses as I got older. I swore off pink. I wore athletic clothes and Under Armor under my jersey to school. I didn't want to brush my hair and forget about wearing jeans or a cute top. My school clothes and my play clothes were the same. Now I look back at those school pictures and cringe.

In middle school, after I changed schools, I had to wear jeans. I was forced into tighter pants and girly tops. During activities, I raced down the 40 steps to the field behind the school for 30 minutes of World Cup soccer with every boy soccer player in my school.

Until I met a boy who thought I needed to be less. I was too strong. I was too fast. I was too funny. I was too smart. I wasn't girly enough. I wasn't dumb enough. Everything I was, everything I did, was too much for him. So, I made myself less.

I made myself smaller. I was quieter. I started to hate my strong and powerful body. I stopped trying so hard to be a great student. It didn't happen all at once. I was chipped away like cracking nail polish. At first, the cracks are barely noticeable until a

big piece breaks away, and then, all at once, the weaknesses are there, as visible as spider veins. He found every single one and picked, pick, picked at me. I stopped going down to the field. I stopped making friends. I stopped trying to be phenomenal.

I would ask for him to come to my games, and he would make empty indefinite promises to try. He would make me late for practices. He was angry when I was gone on weekends for tournaments or tryouts. He never made any plans for us until I was gone one weekend per month, training with the Olympic team for my age group.

He wasn't strong or fast or smart or good at sports. I thought he was kind and funny. I was wrong.

The self-consciousness bled into soccer. I started being concerned with how I looked at practice and at games. I wore makeup to play in the 95-degree summer on turf. The foundation leaked into my white jersey. I rolled my shorts to try and make my legs look longer and my ass bigger. I pulled at my jersey to keep my stomach from showing through. I checked to make sure my fingers could still fit around my wrists during drills.

I grew my hair and pulled out "slut strands" from my pre-wrap to frame my face. I stopped watching soccer with my mom because my passion was too much.

I stopped celebrating my goals so much to appear less boastful. I pulled back on my aggression to appear less manly. I slowed down my sprints so he could win if we raced to the car. I traded my converse for heels and then hated the way you could see my calf muscles when I walked or the way my quads flexed when I shifted my weight. I hated the body that allowed me to be phenomenal.

I hated it so much that I took pocketknives to my forearms and thought how hard I would need to ram myself into my bathroom counter for it to do some real damage. I

wanted my sport taken away from me so I wouldn't have to quit. But I fought back with every injury I sustained, every hateful coach that benched me or told me I was "too little" or "too much." I fought for my sport, my body, and my career. I wanted it so badly, and at the same time, I wanted it to end.

At the time, I didn't understand. Now, I think about Brandi Chastain ripping her shirt off in the Women's World Cup on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, because she just scored the winning goal against China in the final. She was carded and fined for indecent exposure and over the celebration. No one has ever told Cristiano Ronaldo to put his shirt back on. I think about Mia Hamm sprinting down the field at five feet and five inches tall and not caring that her defenders were twice her size. I think about Marta becoming one of the greatest players in the world, not just among women but among men. I think about all of these women who were women and athletes. I think about their strength, femininity, courage, and passion, and I remember. I remember the feeling of sprinting down the field, dodging players, and running for a goal. I remember the feeling of a ten-second 120-yard sprint. I remember every goal I ever scored, and I can't breathe.

I shake from the memories of wet, freshly painted, and cut grass. I hear the sounds of the flags flapping in the wind. I remember the smell of sweat and life while I smiled during practice, games, and fitness.

I remember my second personal trainer, Coach Manuel, agreeing to train me for the first time. In the fifth grade, I walked onto the field, ready for my first training session with him. I didn't know that he only agreed to one session as a trial run. My first trainer, Coach Paul, moved away and vouched for my ability.

"She is worth the time, Manuel. I promise."

“I don’t train girls” was his only reply.

“Just meet with her once and see that she is worth it all.” Coach Paul replied.

“Fine, tell the mother that I will do one session, and we can go from there. If I decide that she isn’t worth my time, I won’t train her.”

I showed up. I smiled at every drill. I laughed with every movement. I listened, and I learned. In the end, he decided. I was worth it.

After that first session, I trained with Manel once or twice a week until I was sixteen, and he moved away. I met with him to train others, mostly boys. Manuel would say, “I have someone coming to work with you today.”

The boys would stop their juggling competitions and turn to ask, “who is it? what’s his name?”

Manuel only laughed and pointed at me as I jogged toward the field, “that’s her.”

“You have to be kidding, Coach.”

“No way she will be able to keep up with us.”

“Why would you even tell her that she could come?”

“Because,” Manuel would say, “she is going to kick your asses. She’s the best player I’ve ever trained.”

After Manuel left, he sent me to work with Igor, who has become a lifelong friend of mine. Where Manuel was a father figure, Igor was like a big brother. He came to dinner with my family. I tutored him in school since he was from Brazil and hadn’t been in America for too long. They both became my family. They helped me fall deeper in love with the sport and often with my own body and myself.

You see, that's why I couldn't quit. I couldn't quit after all the pain, the torment, and the injuries. I just loved the game more than I hated myself and more than I hated him.

## ANATOMY LESSON

inspired by *White Iris* by Georgia O'Keeffe

For example, Feminine (n): the female sex  
or gender; white petals blush with purple  
androgyny. The iris' signal leads to her yellow  
bush the style arm is her clit

teased and erect because they  
can't look at a flower and not think  
cunt – excuse me, vagina. His lips  
cluck across her velvet

labia, the “it's - my - pussy  
and - I - want - it -now”, ripening.  
He decides what she can be. Creator.  
To him, she is a cluster lace

of nerves in a puffy  
vulva and doughy breasts wrapped  
in a plaid skirt. It's not a vagina.  
It's a goddamn iris, penetrated and white.

## WHAT MY THERAPIST TELLS ME—SO I AM GOING TO TELL YOU

March 2022

When I think about my athletic career, I think about everything that I should've been and what I kept myself from being. I think about what was expected of me and what I expected. I wanted all of it. I wanted to be the best. I wanted to be the best to the point that I ignored my body when it told me that I was doing too much, I was trying too hard. Then, I punished my body when it failed me. I refused to fuel it because it needed to learn its real limits. My lungs burned with each breath of air, and my quads shook with every stride. The stabbing pain in my side was enough to make me stop. I was angrier then.

Angry that my body wouldn't enter that euphoric state. The second wind would never come. It never got easier no matter how hard I trained, and I never felt any different. I never looked any different. I only found solace in the praise of my coaches, parents, and teammates, but when that praise was gone, I was left empty. I was worthless without their words. I was worthless when no one was looking because I would fail when no one was looking. The anxiety consumed me. The self-doubt whispered in my ear. The punishments flashed before my eyes. All the things I could put this body through until it knew what real suffering looked like—the harm I could cause to build strength.



So many coaches told me that I needed to be in pain to be stronger. I needed to train a certain way to look like the monster I needed to be on the field. The best was when they told me that I needed to grow.

“If you were just a few inches taller,” they would say.

I was eighteen. I wasn’t growing anymore. I hadn’t grown in six years. I tried to tell myself that I didn’t need the height. I was strong. I was fast. I was smart. I am still all of those things.

*I am —*

A small phrase, a state of being that I couldn’t and sometimes still can’t use with any positivity.

I am fat. I am short. I am weak. I am slow. I am stupid. I am worthless. I am dirty. I am ridiculous. I am too much. I am too little. I am not enough.

I’ve tried the self-help thing. I’ve tried the look in the mirror and tell yourself that you are beautiful. That you are strong. That you are smart. That you are everything that you have ever needed to be and will ever need. I just don’t believe it. I don’t believe it because he is there. He is there inside me, screaming and shaking his head in disappointment.

*Let him go.* That’s what my therapist tells me.

Let *him* go.

Doesn’t she know that he invades the nucleus of my cells? He is my cancer. My AIDS breaking down my immune system, making me fragile. He is the cavity that eats away at my self-worth. He is the piece of myself that I hate more than anything I’ve encountered in my life. I hate him more than the people who beat my dogs and threw them out like garbage. I hate him more than I hated myself after Matthew persuaded me

to have sex at fifteen. I hate him more than I hated myself when I pushed so hard on the corner of my bathroom countertop, praying that my uterus would be punctured, so I could be skewered and never have sex again.

Let *him* go.

It concusses me. His words concuss me. I tried to concuss me. I wanted to forget his words. I wanted to look in the mirror and not hear his Italian accent, thick with cigarette smoke and stale espresso. I wanted to look in the mirror and not see his words tattooed on my body like scorch marks. His insults. His critiques. His compliments.

Let *him* go.

I can't. He has become me. He lives inside me, parasitic and raging. He has pulled my reigns for so long I don't remember how to turn my head without their guidance. I don't know the taste of my tongue without the bit of his opinions. I pulled and pulled against his rage. I pulled against his anger and his bitterness. I pulled until I had no strength left, and I moved in time with his commands. I moved to please him. He touched me with hugs of praise and high fives of joy, and I looked at him. I didn't recognize the joy in his face and couldn't replicate it in my own. So, he punished me.

Let *him* go.

I am trying. I want to pull my cleats out of their bag — left to crack and split — not forgotten but feared. I want to look at the soccer ball in my garage and hear the crowds who used to cheer my name and my number. I remember the smell of wet field grass and fresh white paint. I remember squinting at the sun as it reflected off the bleachers and hearing the small patter of cleat spikes on the concrete around me. It

sounds like fat rain falling on a windshield as you drive into an unexpected shower. The sound of those cleats used to cleanse me.

I would do anything to be clean again.

Do you remember all those people who told you that you weren't strong enough? That you weren't good enough? That you would never be anything more than what you are? Remember all those people who told you all those things that you would never be and know that they were wrong.

So, how do we accept the end of our careers when we weren't ready for the ending? I am still working on that. I want to tell you that I have some magic cure to soothe what is broken inside you. I wish that I could tell you that after three years, I feel better, but I don't. My senior season was the first one in my life that I didn't score a single goal. I was the center forward, and for whatever reason, I couldn't put the ball in the back of the net during a game. I even missed in a PK shootout which I'd never done before. By all the markers that count, my senior season was an embarrassment. I was tired. I was tired of Lorenzo, G, and all the memories of the past three years that weighed on me every time I saw their faces. But I wasn't tired of the sport.

I wish I could tell you that I got over it, but you're here, with me, and you know the truth. That isn't this kind of story. I am not that person, and I don't think you are either. You are here because you didn't make it. You are angry. You are hurt. You are sad. You are here because you failed. You are here because you couldn't let it all go, and it consumed you at least for a while. You are here because your exhaustion got the best of you. You are here because you couldn't overcome the adversity of all of it. You tried your hardest, and it wasn't enough.

You are here because you still love the sport.

I still love soccer.

You can still love the sport. You can still love yourself. We are worth so much more than the trophies on the shelf and the medals on the walls. We are worth more than if others believe what we used to be was true. You are worth so much more because you failed. You survived your failure — you continue to survive.

You failed. You are formerly phenomenal.

We failed . . . and it's okay. You are not alone.