

Treading Water in Manhattan

EMMA SCHAIN

My grandmother sat in the couch, literally *in* the cushions, with no clear distinction between where the textures of the couch ended and she began. Her participation in the happenings around her was distilled to the point of silent passivity. I noticed her pink and white suit was fraying at the seams—it was most likely a Marshall’s purchase. As she got older, my grandmother substituted her trips to Bloomingdales and Talbots with Marshalls, the discount store that I made fun of my own mom for patronizing. In my grandmother’s case, this surrender to the discount racks seemed sad. It was as if her deflated soul couldn’t take the newness of a department store, and she only belonged among the half-priced racks, where she had slowly and carefully picked her way through the polyester blouses and knit sweaters to get to the suit she now wore day in and day out.

When my aunt Ann signaled it was time for dinner, Mimi separated herself from the couch, and Ann, my cousins, and I watched her out of the corners of our eyes. Mimi was often watched from the corners of our eyes now. We gathered around the table, clasped our hands, bowed our heads, closed our eyes, and commenced with the traditional Lord’s Prayer. Mimi’s commitment to prayer is as strong as it was during her childhood when she was a part of a huge Irish-Catholic clan in New Haven, during the war years, the years of raising four children, and at eighty-nine the Lord’s Prayer still faithfully swirled around her, attaching itself to her commitment and faith and grace.

“Bless us, oh Lord, in these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord . . . Amen.” In an attempt to escape from the dark Sunday evening gloom, or perhaps inspired by the small reclamation of our Irish Catholic heritage, the conversation turned toward the future, in the direction of the next celebration, the next excuse to bring the clan together, toward Mimi’s birthday. When asked what she wanted to do, Mimi answered, “It might be nice to have people over to my house in New Haven.” The response was sinister in its brutal confusion. The New Haven home she spoke of was the home of her childhood. It has not been a part of her life for

over fifty years. We all kept our eyes averted; no one could bear to look at the reaction on her face in response to what was coming next.

“Mom,” Ann was firm as she said, “Mom, where do you live?”

“New Haven,” was Mimi’s answer.

“What about 17 Lincoln Avenue?” And then, like a cannonball, it hit her. I wanted to throw myself across the table as they do in action movies and take the blow for her; I didn’t think her skeletal frame could survive the impact. I was willing to take it in the stomach, in the chest, in the face, anywhere. But before I could move, she was hit. It was like watching a particularly violent gust of wind whip the cherry trees in springtime and the pink and white blossoms falling, shamed and disgraced and stripped of dignity, landing face down on the pavement.

The brutality of these moments comes and goes rather swiftly, but I still cannot face her when they do. It would be unfair, dishonest for me to pretend that I am capable of protecting her, and so, locked into this state of helplessness, I pretend not to notice the new layer of pink and white flowers beneath her chair. If I ignore the reality, maybe she won’t notice that with every gust of wind, she is becoming more bare, vulnerable, weak.

“Oh my gosh, I’m losing my marbles.” Her voice shrank and disappeared into the night; her moment of recognition inflicted a pain that crept beneath my skin and stayed there. Through the rest of the meal, we tried to let her mistakes evaporate, but they just rose and lingered above our heads until Ann served vanilla ice cream, and we let a confused reality rest. But still Mimi wasn’t lifted from her deep, withering state—she sat in her fraying suit from Marshall’s, and the rest of us waited.

I am sometimes caught off guard by the overwhelming sense of transition, of alteration, of disruption amplified in the days that we spend together as a family. We are thrown off balance and feel uneasy in our cores as we are forced to watch Mimi slip in and out of what is real. The foundation is shaken, and everyone shifts a little to counterbalance the changes. But it doesn’t take much for her vulnerabilities to stand out, and we are faced with another reminder of the inevitable change and loss that looms. I have lost my faith that Mimi’s vulnerabilities can withstand the harshness of her age. I have lost my faith in her capability to protect herself. Her physical state of delicacy and fragility is emphasized by her slowness in movement, in recollection. There will come a gust of wind strong enough to fell her. In preparation, the rest of us entwine our roots with hers, growing downward into the soil of our history.

The roots beneath Mimi's strength are ninety years old. She lives in a way I cannot understand—I do not have the years, the lives seen come and gone, the people, the loss, or the human condition. I barely know the human condition. She, on the other hand, is experiencing the greatest and most intense and mysterious part of being human, and that is coming to terms with mortality. There is nothing ambiguous about mortality, no mixing of reality with fantasy. It is the clearest moment—clarity of mind and freedom of soul. These days she fades in and out of reality, blurs the lines separating childhood and adulthood, her husband from her father. She sits in the couch, and I want to save her from this hazy internal dialogue and its capacity to confuse the real with memory and prick her with pains of nostalgia, confusion. Ninety years of fatigue have accumulated to yield a subterranean exhaustion so deep that the rest of us can almost feel it vibrate through our spines. We anticipate the last moment, the day when the foundation will crumble, and we are left brokenly treasuring the pieces. Meanwhile, we shoulder this anchored fear of losing her. Heavy and iron, it clasps itself around our necks.

The final unforgiving days of December found me at Think Coffee, the Mercer Street rest stop where I spent many nights with highlighter in hand, piles of papers before me, and strong coffee. This time I was alone, with no agenda, no deadlines, due dates, backseat naggings of my subconscious reminding me of my scholastic responsibilities. I had James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* in my bag, but no obligation to read it. Leonard Cohen was somber in the background. Caffeine was the only stimulant that kept me feeling alive, but numbness and tiredness ate away at my still hands. Behind the counter was a choreographed collective of twenty-somethings, all wearing thrift store garb and ambiguous sexual orientations with equal coolness, adding to the urban continuity of youth and eagerness and ambition.

In this environment, I am aware of my age. I am not staring at the long span of life, but looking toward a more immediate future, the next reading assignments, weekend, summer vacation, internship, job, apartment. I am drawn from a world that includes a comprehensive spectrum of the human condition and am left with just youth, perhaps the most fleeting part of life. Amidst exposed brick walls and vegan cupcakes, I am caught in a buzz of hope for the future as my own future takes an enthusiastic turn, influenced by the romanticism, drive, artistry of my surroundings. I soak it all in to the point of heavy saturation, reinvigorated not just by the caffeine in my coffee, but by the zeal that pervades the room.

But at the end of December, the day before my flight home, my ambition is exhausted. I am forced uncomfortably into the present, rubbing the burn

on the tip of my tongue against the roof of my mouth, paralleling the irritation with my own impatience for twenty-four hours to pass before I can board the plane bound for San Francisco. For a means of escape I read Frey's words, slightly sickened by his stories of rehabilitation. I realized that I was seeking numbness like Frey's drug-addicted self sought alcohol, meth, crack. He stood in the blood-slicked trenches of warfare and faced the ultimatum that teased his weary soul to surrender. Frey could not let his fatigue consume him; with one slip he would be dead. With blood and guts Frey fought fatigue, attempted to recover ambition. My fight to recover ambition against a consuming fatigue was nothing compared to his. My fight was just beginning. And already I craved the relief calling from the comforts of home, from a kitchen in Berkeley thousands of miles away. Sitting without ambition is exhaustingly difficult. I cannot foster a sense of contentment in the present without one eye sneaking glances at the future.

I learned to tread water when I was seven. It was summertime at the James Lemos pool, and my mom insisted that I practice egg-beater motions with my legs until I couldn't keep my body above the water any longer. I was impatient; I wanted to keep swimming, to splash my way across the pool until my eyes burned from the chlorine. But my mom would not let me swim until I could stay in one place and keep my body afloat. She was adamant, telling me that treading water is what will oftentimes keep someone alive, but the ability to stay in one spot does not come without practice. I did not take what she said to heart, and as soon as she turned her attention to my brother, I jetted away.

Swimming toward an intended destination keeps me afloat; once I have to stop and recognize the present moment, the motion of treading water is so much more exhausting. When forced to be in the present the details, feelings, sounds, senses, are intrusively forced upon me. But when I reach these intended destinations, I cannot stay still and soak them in. My mind wanders, my body urges me to keep going, enchanted by what is to come. I do not have the strength to keep my legs going in egg-beater motions. I get tired too quickly. Ambition points me towards the future.

Fatigue and mortality go hand in hand. We understand our mortality when weariness becomes a battled state that causes the body to be sore from fighting. Tiredness brings acute awareness of the limitations of being human. When youth is drained, when my ambition has run out, there is Mimi. In my moment of weariness, I had the sunny Bay Area to look forward to. But what comforts does my grandmother have awaiting her? I dare not ask for fear

there are none. I feel pain, actual pain in my body, when I stand in the sterile kitchen of her new home, an independent living apartment, and read on the calendar that her Monday highlight is a chaperoned trip to the grocery store, followed by bridge at eight-o'clock. She asks me if I want to join her for dinner one day, and then leads me to the dining hall where the menu is slightly more upscale but just as mass-produced as those meals I eat at dining halls. The humanity of her years is stripped from her daily life, and there is little hiding the fact that she now lives in a state of stagnation, even regression. To live without the possibility of finding ambition is to find oneself at the end of the road.

I sat at Think Coffee, exhausted after four months of college, of adrenaline rushes, and late night lattes that kept me typing furiously into the night. Mimi sits with ninety years of fatigue resting next to her. The tiredness etches itself into her face, defining every line, every wrinkle, and shows itself in her slow movement and her instability. I waited with a tedious fatigue overwhelming my senses, overtaking my reality, bruising the tender, exposed vulnerabilities that come with being homesick and alone. Mimi sat in the couch at Ann's house, her grasp on reality slipping. At a nearly-empty bar in Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, a man sits on a stool, nursing a drink. He is tired, he is displaced, he is fatigued, and this fatigue is immortalized in the painting. His back is to me; there is no clear vision of his face. I know nothing about him, and yet I empathize with him. I can feel his struggle to stay awake, that residual pressure behind the eyes, the hanging weight of every body part, the weary strength it takes just to keep one's eyes open and head up. There is no clear explanation for his fatigue, but the intensity of his tiredness is reflected in the shadows that loom over the bar, descending from all sides, the inevitable darkness that comes with the crescendo of night. The shadows, the bright lights, the hunched statures of the bartender and the couple across the bar are all caught in the same fatigue that works its way from the epicenter of the painting outward until I feel the pressure sensation building behind my eyes. My back begins to hunch, my shoulders rise, my body feels heavy, and I turn my mind away from this battle. I do not need to know the reason behind his weariness to know how it feels. It is a moment of clarity, a moment that transcends the painting and attaches itself to my body. He sits on the stool at the bar. I sit in the chair at the coffeeshop. Mimi sits in the couch in Ann's living room, and we are all connected by a moment of fatigue.

The human experience is muddled with superfluous details—a burned tongue, final research papers, subway rides, shoe shopping. But universal con-

cepts are crystallized with unmasked clarity. The clarity of watching someone else approach the final destination is distinctly painful. It is a reminder of mortality, of the unease of not knowing what comes next. Mimi lives in a place where the apartments occasionally open up for new residents to move in, and I don't want to think about why they become available. It is so clear, here in this place of white walls and white carpeting, that this is the last rest stop for her. The couch does not hold her fatigue with the promise of reviving it with youth. It is cradled gently as it gradually sinks into the cushions. The rest of us watch, but we still keep our distance. The only way to understand the possibilities of age is to be turning ninety, knowing that another decade is a stretch, not knowing exactly how it will happen, but that at one point, sooner rather than later, it will. In the meantime, she is left watching the extended nucleus of the family bustle around and clear dishes and talk about parties and holidays and marriages and graduations and the possibilities of babies. We are caught up in the future, and she is caught up in the present, and despite her sometimes muddled perceptions, she still has the better view. Without anticipatory thoughts, she sees the beauty in the family as it exists in the moment. Though she cannot swim at the same pace as the rest of us, she can tread water. When fatigue overcomes her, the exhaustive treading of water will cease. The water will close itself around her body and swallow.

WORKS CITED

- Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Random House, 2003.
Hopper, Edward. *Nighthawks*. 1942. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.