

“THE HUSH IN THE HIGH COUNTRY”

By

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Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of English

in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

May 2021

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The Hush In the High Country

The past year and a couple months have been globally tumultuous with the COVID-19 virus outbreak and pandemic. Following the outbreak of the virus, the college careers we had as students and faculty dramatically changed right before our very eyes. When I began this semester remotely, the second semester that would be online due to the pandemic, I was faced with the choice of what to base my departmental honors thesis on. I ultimately decided to write a series of flash-fiction stories that captured a few individual members of the Boone community's experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic.

I began with creating a short survey and posting it on the Boone community Facebook group, *App State Classifieds*. The first survey question asked if the individual lived in Boone. If they did not, their survey was immediately not considered for the project, as this was to be representative of the members of the town. Other questions included if the individual had tested positive with COVID-19 at any point, whether or not they experienced symptoms if diagnosed, their pronouns, and they were asked to describe a moment of complete happiness or sadness during the pandemic for me to base a piece off of. Each story was promised anonymity if the individual so choosed, and I have received clear consent of each individual to use their experiences for my creative liberty.

There was some difficulty with the survey, however. Some people refused to give their consent to me, making their surveys immediately null. Some respondents gave nothing more to their explanation about their pandemic experience than "I was sad that I couldn't see my friends." In instances like this, I decided against using these responses because I would be

forcing a story to come from nothing, and I feared it would not be representative of the Boone locals' experience, making my thesis have less substance and truth to it. Due to these factors, I ultimately had less usable material for my thesis presentation than I originally thought. In parallel to our coronavirus journey so far, though, we must press on.

In the end, I have a total of seven unique stories of Boone locals. My goal ultimately was to depict the lives and struggles of individuals throughout this entire situation. I chose a vignette style for these pieces of flash fiction, because I wanted to create the effect of peering into a moment in time in these subjects' lives. As some respondents to the survey preferred anonymity, I have decided to title the individual pieces with their survey numbers, adding credit at the end for their allowance of me to use their stories. We've been tackling the virus this entire time as a whole, and we often forget that collective and shared experiences affect everyone a little differently.

Thank you.

#1

The days were stretching longer, more monotonous with the hotter weather. My feet were propped just above the pillows on the elongated window sill, reaching far from my crown towards the end of the bed. Occasionally, a wisp of smoke would catch in the sunlit glass pane while he sparked the crushed bud behind me. My high was still vibrating in my chest from an hour previous, so I occupied myself with warming my legs in the April light.

Work had slowed tremendously, following the governor's instructions on restaurant and hotel capacities. The two of us were confined to a bedroom together, to ensure not only our health, but the guarantee that we'd be clear to work when need be. Spirits were low at the inn, however, as whispers of total lockdown and layoffs crawled along the dated walls; something of a looming possibility we tried to ignore.

The peach ice cream we had made as a time-passing experiment sat comfortably in my stomach, cooling me just enough to spring light goosebumps over my exposed skin. To combat the sensation, I pulled the lightly worn blanket over me despite the knowledge that I'd just throw it off again in a few minutes.

In the spaces between the old movies he watched for class, we strolled down by the creek just outside his house. Careful not to alert the landlord's dog-- attempts that were made in vain, as she barked ferociously any time we were within her sightline-- we stepped over the long grasses that settled by the bank. Concealed by the overgrown foliage, we would find comfort in smoking some more. Once the familiar heat would settle in the back of my throat, I longed to stretch out again beneath the slightly opened window and fall into a short sleep.

We hadn't been together for very long. Unfortunately, the alarms of the pandemic rang out only four months into our relationship. Luckily enough, we fell into a very comfortable stride quickly, so having to confine ourselves within his home for a few weeks wasn't a strain. He busied himself on his computer when time allowed, and cast nervous glances behind him to make sure I was still content from time to time; his ex girlfriend had different feelings about him not paying attention to her constantly, while I found myself just comforted by his presence.

Occasionally he would crawl back onto the bed to spend time with me, and I would run my fingers through his dark hair while his face nestled in the crook of my neck. I admired my handiwork, noting that I had done a considerably great job in cutting his hair on the porch. He didn't necessarily want me to-- he's always been a worrier-- but due to the fact that barber shops were closed, my 8 dollar scissors had to do. He hummed tunes of unfinished melodies from the few hours he would spend a day finger picking at the strings of his inherited guitar. With fervent kisses placed upon each other's cheeks, we would quietly go back to whatever it was we were doing before. I took this opportunity to wrap myself back in the tattered blanket and drift off slowly.

Upon awakening when the sky was fading into a milder indigo, I returned to the colored pencils that laid on the floor next to me. I passed the time tediously outlining and filling in the leaves and flowers on the pages in the coloring book I had picked up at the store while he worked on dinner for the two of us. Overhead, the landlord's dog scampered across the wood floors, barking at what easily could have been nothing. The smell of shrimp wafted through the slightly opened door and a deep grumble sounded from my belly.

Hours later, we laid in bed, keeping one another company with the warm touch of clean skin on skin. My wet hair left a cold ring on the pillow beneath my head, a comforting contrast to

the humidity of the room. Drifting further into unconsciousness, I thought happily of the year to come, once the pandemic would be all over.

How naive of me.

#17

Elaine was growing weaker as the days came and went. I checked on her frequently, making sure she was comfortable and had fresh water at her bedside. She spoke in whispers behind her mask, retelling me stories of her past as a young woman growing up in San Francisco while I combed her hair into a tight, neat bun, just the way she liked it. She would pat my hands after I had finished, murmur a thank you, and turn to the book she had currently been reading while the natural light was still coming in through the window. Earlier today, when I carefully shaped a bun with her champagne hair (it had been strawberry blonde in her youth), she sighed and confessed to me that she missed the warmth of California, and that the Boone autumn only made her sad.

I knew why she had told me this, and me alone. I wouldn't try and meddle with her feelings. Some caretakers at the nursing home would try to include more vitamin C in the patient's diet or force them into some arts and crafts project to boost their spirits. I helped by listening.

It was true, though, that the winter was approaching sooner than expected. The end of October was introducing bone-chilling winds and plenty of rain. It made it too dark for Elaine to read by window light during most days. She spent most of her time peering out the same window and humming old classics she enjoyed, thinking of stories to tell me in the spaces in between checking on other residents. I was the primary caretaker on the day shift of three residents: Elaine, Murray, and Gretchen.

Murray was an 87 year old Vietnam veteran, and still had night terrors; he would recount them to me the next morning over his bowl of cereal and glass of juice. We had him on anti-anxiety medicine, but he still glanced frequently over his shoulders as if someone was out to get him. He had a generally grouchy demeanor, but lit up when talking about his grandchildren, so we brought them up often. These days, however, the topic saddened him as the global pandemic spread, making him unable to see them face to face at all.

Gretchen was a portly 79 year old woman standing only at five-foot-one. She didn't like me too much, and often followed my every move with her one good eye. The blue bead watered constantly, but refused any tissues I offered. I believe that her disdain came from the fact that she much preferred her night nurse, and that I had vaguely resembled the estranged daughter she once mentioned in passing. For these reasons, Gretchen took her medicine, drank her juice, and tried to say as few words to me as possible. I was honestly pretty okay with that. It was no secret that I favored Elaine anyhow, but I had to at least pretend to put as much time in with my other patients.

In the lulled moments of the day I crept back to Elaine's room, sitting in the armchair beside her bed. The chair was usually meant for the patients or visitors, but she enjoyed the comfort of her mattress.

"I don't know how you sit in that raggedy thing," she commented quietly, shaking her head a little.

"C'mon Elaine it's not that bad! It's comfy!" I was telling the truth, I did like the chair and chose to sit there most of the time when I was in her room.

"Comfortable enough for you, maybe," she began, "but you're young. My spine would turn into a pretzel in that. Such an ugly color too..." I rolled my eyes and propped her pillows

up, making sure her back had enough support. Even behind her mask, I could see her crack a smile. “Oh honey you know I’m just teasing you,” she murmured.

Leaving her was always the hardest part of the day. I knew the realities of my job, sadly, and always crossed my fingers walking into the building the next morning that my patients had survived the night. But every morning that I got to pull Elaine’s hair back from her face was a blessing. The next day was different, though.

It should have acted as an omen. The drive to work was longer, I drove slower to remain safe in the downpour. Ducking quickly into the doors of the nursing home to start my shift, I felt a change in energy. The night nurse who briefed me on what happened during the night had a pained look in her eyes, and I knew. Elaine was not doing well. I finished clocking in and dropped my dripping jacket into my cubby. I hovered in the doorway, making sure my face mask was on securely, and stepped in. She looked up at me and took in a deep breath, speaking softly.

“It’s too dark to read,” she complained. The rain clouds had concealed the sun this morning. I nodded to her and washed my hands, preparing to fix her hair.

“No, no,” she stopped me, “no need for that today.” I felt a pull in my chest, and I knew she knew things weren’t looking good. I pulled the armchair up next to her and held her left hand. It was smaller, softer than mine. After a long pause she sighed.

“I miss my family, Nikki,” she confessed. I felt the tears welling up in my eyes.

“I know, I’m so sorry.”

“I just wish I could see them, I want to kiss my grandchildren one last time,” she said, adjusting her mask back over her nose.

“I know, Elaine. But maybe you will! We can send them an email or give them a call-” she stopped me by shaking her head.

“Nicole, you know just as well as I do that I’m not going to be here too much longer. There’s not enough time.” The tears threatened to spill down my exposed skin.

“Aw, come on now, don’t say that,” I sniffed.

“Go check on your other patients, when you come back, can you read to me? Your eyes are young. They actually work,” she laughed lightly. I wiped away a stray tear and nodded, walking into the hallway to make my rounds with Murray and Gretchen.

Upon returning, Elaine had her eyes closed. I hesitated slightly before coming in, unsure if she was asleep or not.

“Come in, honey,” she said, opening one eye to look at me. I breathed a little easier and sat down, pulling her book into my lap. She was reading *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

I sat, reading the pages aloud to her while she rested, picturing the North Carolina marshes in her mind. I wondered to myself if there was a book based in California that would make her happier to hear me read, but this was the book she had chosen. In the dim grey-blue late morning, her loose, champagne hair like a halo around her crown on the pillows. I read for a good hour or so before her soft snores gave away that she had drifted off, and by early afternoon, she was gone.

#4

The dust that had settled on the window panes grew thicker-- seemingly by the day. She lazily raised a finger, pressing her skin to the glass, and allowing the weight of her extended wrist to fall down, down, leaving a transparent, yet mildly streaked line behind it. The painted wood of the frame was cool to the touch, soothing the fever that only felt like it was getting worse.

Quarantine wasn't horrible. It was lonely, sure, but she was a bit of a homebody anyway. The worst part was working through the symptoms of the virus. She had gotten over the sneezing and congestion a few days before, but the fever and shivering clung to her bones day and night. She rested there in the window seat, resting her forehead against the shaded wood while her body curled towards the afternoon sun to alleviate the shivers. In the moments where her limbs quivered uncontrollably, she longed for a companion to take care of her. Someone to hold her.

She eyed her garden just beyond the patio and sighed. The lettuce was growing, however slower than she expected. Having some fresh produce would help her feel better, she thought. Anything natural and good for her would surely help. She had started the small vegetable garden the September before, with dreams of dinners and picnics garnished with food grown by the will of her own hands. The thought of food made her mouth salivate, something that was seemingly redundant, as she couldn't taste anything anyhow.

As she got to her feet, her joints creaked. The physical fatigue matched with her curved position in the window left her cramped. She arched her spine, letting the rippled cracks loosen her body up to move to the screened door that let the June heat in. She shuffled slowly, barefoot,

beyond the screen, letting it slap closed behind her. The loud sound sent a pulse of pain through her temple, but the soft dewed grass between her toes distracted her from the irritation almost immediately. She plucked some stalks of lemongrass, hoping to make a soup for lunch. She wanted nothing more than to just lay down and rest, but as she was quarantined alone, she had to provide her body with sustenance.

With a handful of her harvest, she sat down in the shade of the big hickory tree a few feet away from the growing produce. She made herself busy plucking the tops and bottoms from the herb to use in the broth while simultaneously catching her breath, even though the exertions were minor. After a few minutes of picking at the herbs, she was overcome with drowsiness and laid her head back in the damp grass. Her dark hair combed and weaved along the blades, curling into a crown above her head. She breathed slowly, trying to regain her energy while the virus still coursed through her body.

With eyes closed, she drifted into a soft sleep, the sun slowly trailing across the sky and illuminating the leaf-shaped spaces in between the branches of the hickory. She slept until the June sunset had transitioned into a deep pink-orange. The once-burning fever had settled into a small, flickering candle flame in her flushed cheeks and the lemongrass was still tucked tightly in her palm, the soup long forgotten.

#26

The Billy Joel album spun on the record player, “Scenes from an Italian Restaurant” bouncing off of the walls in her small apartment. Inside, away from the late-morning traffic rush to the locals’ individual jobs, Hannah stood in front of the mirror, tilting her head from one side to the other. She readjusted the golden glasses on the bridge of her nose (though there were no prescription in the lenses) and she smiled.

Living alone now more than ever was less than ideal-- the pandemic cut her social life significantly, and what once was a solitary sanctuary following long nights with many friends was now a reminder that she lived with herself, and herself only. At first it had been really hard. The summer months that followed the initial lockdown in April were hard emotionally. But now, the long and hot days had mellowed into short, chilling ones and Christmas was quickly approaching. She thought about her family sadly. She’d certainly miss them this holiday season, as the CDC did not recommend travelling for Christmas, but was silently grateful that she’d miss out on her mother’s excitable updates on the newest essential oil trends.

Hannah shook out her hair, running a comb through the damp waves. Looking at herself now, she was beautiful. This was evident to the people she knew, and they had told her many times, trying desperately to convince her of this fact. It wasn’t until she had been alone with herself for so long that she learned to appreciate her own company.

She took stock of herself in this moment, counting the freckles that found their places beneath her left eye (there were six) and looking at the slight upward turn of the tip of her nose. Her cupid’s bow was full and pink, resembling the peonies her grandmother used to grow in the

early summer months of her youth. The smile bloomed from her apple cheeks, and rolled to the center of her lips.

Behind her, the oven clicked to indicate its preheating was done, and she moved to place her brussel sprouts into the billowing warmth. The sudden rush of heat into her face fogged the glasses she was adamant about wearing, despite the lack of visual aid. It was no brunch, but time didn't really matter much when you were basically confined to your four walls. Despite it being 10:25 in the morning, Hannah wanted brussel sprouts, and who was she to deprive herself of such a pleasure? She searched the cupboards for seasonings and additives while the music stalled to hushed static. The record had to be flipped. She found comfort in the silence for a moment, however. Something that came with practice and patience, and she was admittedly proud of herself for doing. It's not easy living in the spaces between noise.

Now that the music had stopped, the wind was the primary soundtrack filling the room. The walls were thick, sure, but the drafts snuck in under the aging door and shoddy window caulking. She turned her head to the left, looking to the outside in search of the noise. Snow had begun to fall at some point during her shower, and she noticed the quick accumulation of it on the blades of grass beyond her unit. The gusts blew the flakes in all directions, choreographing a dance-- perhaps a ballet-- that would continue well into the next evening according to the forecasts.

She turned away from the window, making sure the pan was evenly placed in the oven, and shut the door. Eager to be stimulated by music once more, she switched to an Elton John record rather than flipping the previous one over. She busied herself by finally folding the mound of laundry on her couch. Hanging slightly-wrinkled sweaters back into the closet, Hannah's mind drifted back to the night before.

She was careful, for sure. The virus wasn't something she took lightly in the slightest, and neither did the select few friends she felt safe enough to visit with on occasion. While she had achieved the art of enjoying her own company to the fullest extent, Hannah was only human. She had spent the late hours of yesterday blowing smoke out of June's window. The third floor was the top one, therefore the smell of the marijuana would float to the clear skies above, rather than into someone else's air vents. After the buzz had kicked in, they sang loudly along to songs by teenage boy bands that had long been broken up, something they decided would be a secret to avoid embarrassment from others. Being alone was perfectly comfortable, but this time with June was something she savored.

The oven timer brought her back into the present. Sighing happily, she hugged her knees to her chest atop the rest of the clothes she had yet to fold. She popped a brussel sprout into her mouth after carefully blowing on it, and watched the performance of the snow swirling in perfect time to the music beside her. A brunch date for one.

#28

It wasn't the most common way to spend a birthday, but it would have to do in light of everything going on around us. Twenty-nine should be a time to go out to bars, get absolutely obliterated before pretending you're not hungover at work the next day. Instead, my wife brought me a celebratory lunch consisting only of rice and beans... again. Of course I thanked her. It wasn't her fault that Walmart was cleaned out of groceries in the midst of people panicking.

We had planned our mission for later that day. She and I, along with our two other roommates, sat around the coffee table, pooling the money we had left from being laid off a month prior. Unemployment assistance was still incredibly backed up and no one had seen a dime of relief. We made a game plan, but only sort of. It was pretty difficult to work around stuff we didn't know would even be on the shelves. We made a list of meats, toilet paper, bread, dairy-- anything that we could get our hands on besides rice and beans. It was silly, but I sat around waiting for the errand, almost giddy with excitement.

We went ridiculously over the top, that part I'll admit to. Donning all black, the four of us piled into one car and set off for the store. We had only about \$35 between all of our pockets, but we'd make it work, right? Black masks covering mouths and noses, we walked from the parking lot into the mothership. My wife gasped, and I actually shed a tear.

The shelves were empty.

We darted up and down the aisles. The only things left of any nutritional value were frozen broccoli florets and orzo. We picked them up, thinking of a half-assed soup dinner we

could potentially make. The toilet paper aisle was still bare, one of the few things that remained consistent throughout this tumultuous month.

We stopped by the barren dairy coolers and collected our thoughts. There were no eggs, no crackers, no meat, no frozen meals, no sweets, and no bread. But there was one thing... alcohol. With mischievous grins we moved to the beer cooler, picking up anything and everything that we could get our hands on. It wasn't a healthy dinner, but beggars can't be choosers, after all.

Satisfied with the haul that we *did* manage, the four of us loaded beer into the house and stuffed the fridge to the brim. We barely waited at all before we started drinking our liquid supper. We whipped out all of the board games we had and began a tournament of sorts, growing hazier and more giggly with every crushed can tossed towards the recycling bin. During a riveting game of Clue, my wife stopped and looked at me, holding her White Claw can high in the air.

"Happy birthday, Michael," she tapped the aluminum against my own drink, and downed the rest. The evening continued on like this, Clue being traded out for UNO, which eventually turned into Life. It wasn't a normal birthday by any means, but nothing felt normal these days. And honestly, if it meant having a night like this, I could settle for rice and beans for a few more meals.

#12

Her laughter was infectious. How was this tiny, new human the center of her universe already? Only alive for a year and some change, her niece was her favorite person on the planet. Because she loved Ella so much, quarantine was that much harder.

It wasn't fair. She had only had tonsillitis. Going into the doctor meant a routine COVID test, and that shouldn't have been any issue given that she only ever saw her roommate and her family. She had done everything right. Kept a small bubble, worked from home, and wore a mask out in public. So why the hell was she staring at the ceiling, wishing she was nannying the baby right now? How did she even get the virus? Sneaky bastard.

Sarah couldn't tell if being asymptomatic was worse or better. Either way she'd have to be in complete quarantine, but without symptoms, it felt... fake almost. Like there was some sort of mistake, and that she shouldn't be here, alone. Logically, it's better to not have symptoms. Some people still hadn't regained their sense of smell or taste, even months after testing negative. But still, quarantining felt pointless, even though she knew she had to, and was happy to protect others from the virus. If it was worth anything, her throat felt better.

It wasn't like she was completely isolated from her family. They video chatted with her at least twice a day, and her sister even went as far as delivering Sarah's groceries on her porch. It was a relief, having a good support system, but it was still hard not having lunches face-to-face or chasing Ella in the hilly yard outside her home.

She supposed it was rather convenient that she had started baking during the past year of the pandemic. It gave her something to do for the two week period she was not to leave her

house, as well as a tasty reward at the end of the hobby. Pulling herself out of bed, she shuffled to the kitchen to see what ingredients she had lying about. She put on some quiet music and brought down a cookbook from the shelf that could definitely stand to be dusted a little. *A chore for later*, she thought. She settled on a blueberry lemon pound cake, and began pulling powders and spices from different cabinets.

She hummed quietly to herself as she sat the butter on the windowsill, directly in the mountain sunlight to soften. Sarah pushed a chair over towards the counter. She was very short, and her brother-in-law had made the mistake of setting the flour on a high shelf from his last visit. She remembered the occasion fondly, when they had made cookies for Ella's birthday. She stood atop the chair's faded wooden seat, straining for the necessary ingredient. Her arms ached with the stretch, and she found herself falling forward with the weight of her body, losing the balance she had on her toes. Catching herself on the shelf before her head made contact with the wood, she took a pause to regain her composure. Taking a different approach, she gave a small hop, grabbing the bag of flour in her fists and falling to the vinyl flooring. The bag landed before her with a clouded *thud*, sending a puff of flour into the air, and unevenly distributing itself into her dark hair.

It was only a minor fall, but the emotional impact of the event left her drained, and admittedly, holding back tears. She stood, dusting herself off and slid the chair back to the table. Placing the bag on the kitchen island, Sarah decided then that she didn't feel like baking anymore.

Lowering to her knees gently on the bathmat, she hung her powdery hair over the basin. She ran the warm water from the faucet and slowly washed out the evidence of her abandoned activity. The white substance flowed in swirls around the tub, mixing in with the bubbling soap

surrounding the drain. She turned off the water, gathering her hair in a freshly dried towel, and moved silently through the living room. She clutched her cell phone in her hand tightly and walked to the kitchen table. She tapped quickly on her screen, and a ringing tone was soon heard. She looked at her reflection in the pending video chat. The corners of her mouth gently turned downwards, and her cheeks were flushed from the steaming water billowing around her face a few minutes prior. In the sunlight that continued to pour through the open window, her eyes caught the rays. The deep brown in them shone brilliantly, and stared back at her. Within a few seconds, the video call was answered.

“Hello?” She could hear Ella squealing happily in the background.

“Mom,” Sarah started, tears forming slowly, “I miss you.”

She spent the next hour retelling the baking accident to her mother before falling back into normal conversation. Feeling comforted, Sarah bid her mother goodbye. She moved onto other endeavors, thinking about the books that were collecting cobwebs on her shelf and long forgetting about the butter slowly dripping from the windowsill down onto the floor.

#5

Packing up her bag, she couldn't help the smile that crept up on her face. She had been isolated in room 207 at the Super 8 motel for the past fourteen days, serving her COVID sentence out in loneliness. The university had been kind enough to give her a room, one of the few miniscule ways in which they pretended to help the students. It wasn't like she would have been homeless without the motel room, but her roommate was immunocompromised, and she loved her too much to risk it.

Ellie slowly slipped her textbooks into her backpack, thinking a little bitterly about the amount of work she still had to do while she was in quarantine. Deadlines are deadlines, and she understood that, but there is only so much one can do while fighting off a terrifying virus and being removed from a familiar environment. She got all of her work done, but she wasn't too happy about it.

Her symptoms hadn't been that bad, luckily. Though she had tested negative twice since getting a positive result two weeks ago, her headache still lingered behind her eyes. Stress, maybe, she assumed contributed to the dull pain. She did one last scan of the room, making sure all her loose ends were tied up and everything was packed away. Ellie checked the bathroom too, which proved to be a good idea. She almost left behind her expensive face wash.

Checkout went smoothly. She made sure her mask was tightly secured on her face, and she applied hand sanitizer before and after interacting with the front desk lady. She knew that there was a stigma surrounding her, though. She had been infected, therefore the staff were

looking at her like she was a threat. Ellie didn't *blame* them, but being looked at like she was... dirty was a side effect of the virus she hadn't anticipated.

Getting into her car was a relief. Not having driven for two weeks had caused her to go a little stir crazy. Even though she made sure to FaceTime her partner and friends throughout the entire process, the lack of freedom to come and go as she pleased proved to be the hardest part of quarantining. The engine purred to greet her key in the ignition, and she didn't hesitate to turn the volume as high as her ears could take, not wanting to agitate the still-present headache.

The drive home was quick, a little too quick. She had taken the long way, wanting to savor her newfound freedom. That being said, she was also eager to see her roommate once more. Pulling into a parking spot, she yanked her key out of the ignition, and bounded up the stairs to her floor. The door was unlocked and slightly ajar, letting in the July afternoon. Ellie pushed the door in, and dropped her bags in the threshold. Milliseconds after she and Georgia met eyes, they enveloped each other into a hug.

A flurry of "I miss you"s and "how are you feeling"s filled the air between the pair, the two holding hands, arms bending at the elbows, and sinking into the loveseat by the window. Finally having caught up with each other, Georgia stopped and smiled.

"I have a 'welcome home' present for you," she announced, sliding into her bedroom quickly. She reemerged with some canvases, new paints, and a cluster of brushes. Georgia had planned a relaxing evening in, painting together.

"Oh my god, you shouldn't have," she feigned a silly voice of flattery. She actually was touched at the gesture, and was excited to do something creative with her friend.

They had set the mood perfectly. The curtains on the living room windows fluttered slowly with the hazy breeze coming in. The half-eaten pizza was tossed to the side, the girls full

and immersed in their works. From time to time, they would lean and glance at each other's works, admiring the details or making comments. Georgia was painting her cat, sadly back home with her mother, and Ellie worked hard on the Boone skyline just beyond the window.

They worked together very quietly, though it wasn't uncomfortable in the slightest. Quiet music played in the background, and she felt an overwhelming sense of comfort. Once finished, Georgia offered to rinse their brushes in the sink, the cloudy water swirling in different directions towards the drain. Meanwhile Ellie sat on the porch, breathing in the warm night that smelled like honeysuckle and incoming rain. When Georgia joined her outside finally, she rested her head on her roommate's shoulder.

"I missed you," she murmured, taking in the new scent of clean hair.

"Aw, Ell, I missed you too."

In that moment, she finally felt herself truly relax and feel safe for the first time since her positive test results. She let out a small sigh, and smiled at the thought of finally being home.

THANK YOU TO THE INDIVIDUALS WHO AIDED IN THIS THESIS

Sarah P.

Ellie G.

Nicole J.

Lilly V.

Michael R.

Hannah M.