The Boy in the Bar of Soap

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The Boy in the Bar of Soap

DELANEY NOVAK

When I was six years old, I had a recurring nightmare about a boy trapped in a bar of soap. The dream took place on a gray day atop gray bleachers. It would start with me, alone on the cold bleachers, next to a bar of soap. I'd look down at the translucent bar—the color of a cadaver’s yellow-tinged flesh—and squint my eyes just enough to see a boy trapped inside. He was disgustingly fat; his pale, white skin matched the color of a dead fish floating belly-up on the shore of a dirty lake. I’d watch his jiggly, bloated arms banging furiously against the inside of the soap bar. His cheeks were a pinkish-red—they had those gross, tiny bumps on them: the kind that look like the skin of a recently-plucked chicken.

The fat boy in the bar of soap terrified me. For one, he was fat, and I couldn’t see how a boy so large could fit into a soap bar so small. Most of all, he terrified me because I could see his flabby, fish-belly arms flailing inside the soap bar and I could see his panicked, wild animal eyes, but all I could do was sit there and gawk in horror. I remember watching his mouth move up and down as he screamed for help, but I could never hear any sound. As a six-year-old, the silence scared me; I couldn’t understand how that boy managed to go completely unheard—stuck and suffocating—without anyone to help him.

Then, the worst part of the dream would come. As I’d sit frozen on those gray bleachers, watching the soundless boy in the bar of soap, it would start to rain. The rain would come slowly at first—each drop a shock to my hot, panicked skin—and then quickly turn into a downpour. As it’d continue to rain, the soap bar would begin to melt. I’d sit there, stupid and frozen, watching the fat boy silently crying for help. He’d never stop banging those white, bloated-fish-belly arms against the soap bar. By the time I would work up enough courage to reach out my tiny, shaking hand, the soap bar would be a sticky puddle. The fat boy would dissolve along with it, leaving nothing but the impression of his two pinkish-red, skinned-chicken cheeks in my mind. The circles of red would float there, suspended in nothingness like the smile of the Cheshire Cat. I’d wake up drenched in sweat, buried beneath my new butterfly comforter. Each night I would scream for my mom and she’d come running into my bedroom, telling me the boy wasn’t real; there was never a time she couldn’t hear my cries.

This morning I woke up before my usual time of 4:11 am. I’d been lying in bed, staring at the world of marbled patterns beneath my closed eyelids, trying to decide whether I was really seeing those slowly swirling shapes or if it was just because I was hungry. Sometimes I thought the shapes looked like stars floating in my own personal galaxy, but today I was sure they were jellyfish undulating in the peaceful nothingness of a black ocean.

When my alarm finally went off at 4:11 am, I yanked back the layers of blankets: my faux-fur throw; my white comforter; my old, butterfly comforter; my fleece, zebra-striped blanket; and my yellow, cotton sheets. I pulled a thick, wool sweater over my pajamas, then dropped to the floor and did eleven pushups.

After I finished, I ran across my room to the dresser that housed my alarm clock, turned its siren-like buzzer off and checked the time: 4:14 am. I’d gotten even slower.

Reaching for my phone, I started the two-hour-and-eleven-minute timer, beginning my
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I started doing this morning walk a couple months ago in July, when Michigan had become too hot to step a foot outside of any air-conditioned environment. At that time, I wasn’t constantly cold, so I was forced to figure out a way to do my two-hour-eleven-minute walk inside: after two days of the four-step march, it had become as routine to me as brushing my Teeth.

After finishing my walk, I massaged my sore feet before getting dressed for the second week of my senior year of high school. I went to open my closet door, pausing to look at that rubbed-off pink name tag I’d made and proudly taped up on the first day of kindergarten. Only three letters remained: “Sam,” it read. I smiled, scoffing at the remnants: of course the last-standing letters spelled the nickname I despised most.

Throughout my life, a few people had called me “Sammy” and some just called me “Samantha,” not giving me a nickname at all. However, most people—like my friends and family—had always called me “Sam.” My nickname never used to bother me, but then in first grade a short boy with glasses that were always covered with greasy fingerprints, told me I had a boy’s name. “Sam is a boy’s name,” he’d laughed. “Sam is a big boy! Sam is a big boy!” I’d always been taller than all the boys in my school, but I’d never been called a boy before. I’d also never been called big; I remember hating how the greasy-glasses boy had drawn out the vowel: “Biyyyyig.”

I put on my favorite white turtleneck and dark blue skinny jeans, glancing at myself in the mirror. My hair looked like the lifeless, dried chili peppers my mom kept on our kitchen table. I analyzed the fit of my clothes: the sweater seemed to be lying looser on my body and my size-zero jeans were only held up by the safety pin I’d fastened to the back. I stood there twirling my dried-chili-pepper hair before beginning the pat down.

Furiously, I worked downwards from my cheeks, to my neck, my collar bones, my sternum, my rib cage, my stomach, my hip bones, my butt, my thighs. After reaching my ankles, I worked my way back up. I felt like an over-zealous TSA agent, certain there was some change—some threat—I’d missed the day before. I exhaled: all my bones were still there. Inhaling, I held my breath as I made it to my arms.

I squeezed them like one would anxiously squish a flour-filled balloon. My sleeves hung away from my arms, but as I squeezed, I was certain they’d grown another layer of fat. It seemed that each day my clothes fit looser and looser, my flabby arms felt fatter and fatter.

“You’ll have to eat only half the apple today,” I muttered as I made my way to the kitchen.

Rounding the hallway, I saw my mom standing at the counter, clad in a silky gray pantsuit; red hair wrapped tightly in the ballet bun she wore for work. She was humming to herself as she putzed around the kitchen making a peanut butter and jelly for my lunch.

I grabbed an apple from the mint green fruit bowl on the kitchen table and rinsed it under
four-step march. Each day after turning off my alarm, I'd assume the power-walking position of an old man trying to pretend he could make it across the street in a timely fashion. I'd take four steps to reach the edge of my bed, pivot, take four more steps to reach the far corner of my room, and repeat the process until the chiming bells on my phone told me it'd been two hours and eleven minutes.

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the faucet.

My mom flashed me a smile, but splotchy, red patches beneath her eyes shattered the facade: I knew she'd been crying.

“Another bad morning?” I asked, glancing at the seedy, strawberry jam-covered knife in my mom's hand.

“Oh,” she sighed, allowing the corners of her mouth to drop, “I just had another dream about your father.”

“The same one?” My eyes followed her hand as she dipped a spoon into the Jif peanut butter jar.

She nodded.

Ever since May, when my dad had a heart attack in bed, my mom had been dreaming about the moment he died. I asked her about it a couple months ago, after I’d moved my morning walk to my bedroom and could hear her muffled sobs through the far wall of my room each time I passed.

I nodded in understanding, like an alcoholic might bob his head while listening to the all-too-familiar story of a fellow addict.

My mom stared at me, waiting for a reply.

I just stood there gently moving my head up and down like a recently-flicked bobblehead. There was nothing else I could say: I missed my dad too, but that wouldn’t help bring him back.

As my mom glopped a thick layer of peanut butter on a slice of spongy, white bread, I noticed the apple still in my hand; nonchalantly, I slid it behind my back.

“Well, I have to go get ready,” I said, taking a step away.

My mom nodded, smooshing the gooey slices of bread together.

I replied with a few quick, final nods—for good measure—and made my way back to my room to put on foundation.

I hated wearing foundation because it felt like I was smearing a thick layer of mud on my face, but I had to wear it: the scars on my cheeks were too obvious without it and I didn’t like people asking why my face was so red.

Sitting at my vanity, I set the apple down, poured a glob of the cool, tan foundation on a sponge and began to pat it into my skin. As I patted—squinting my eyes just enough to make out my reflection—I thought of the spongy bread of my peanut butter and jelly. I didn’t understand how my mom could care enough to pack me a lunch, but not enough to see that I’d still had an apple for breakfast the past fourteen days. As I stood there, rhythmically patting, I thought back to our argument two weeks ago.

“Sam, shall it be the usual for your last first day of school?” my mom said, pretending to wipe away a tear.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, cutting an apple into dice-sized pieces and plucking them off the knife with my lips. My skin felt hot as I remembered I’d have to bring lunch now that school was starting.

“Actually mom,” I said, “I was thinking about getting hot lunch this year.”

“What? You hate hot lunch!” Her left, overly-plucked
the faucet.

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“Actually mom,” I said, “I was thinking about getting hot lunch this year.”

“What? You hate hot lunch!” Her left, overly-plucked
eyebrow arched into an upside-down V.

I looked at her as I slowly chewed an apple piece. I didn’t know what to say; I did hate hot lunch and my mom knew it. Ever since I’d tried it on the first day of sixth grade and called her crying from the principal’s office because I missed my peanut butter and jelly, it had become a running joke between the two of us: never send Samantha to school without her PB and J.

“Well,” I started, “I thought I’d try something new—”

“Samantha,” my mom cut me off, “is there something you’re not telling me?” She glanced at my breakfast of apple.

“What?” I tried to sound confused, like I couldn’t possibly understand how an idea as absurd as that could pop into her head.

“You know, you look a little thin to me,” she trailed off, “I know I haven’t paid much attention recently, but I sure hope you’ve been having more than apples for breakfast.” She motioned to the half-carved apple on my plate.

“Mom, I’m fine,” I said. “I’m just having some stomach issues these days. Anyways, you should be glad I’m eating an apple—it’s saving you a doctor’s bill!” I tried making a joke to lighten the mood.

“Hm.” Her green eyes narrowed, searching mine. I stared back at her, first widening my eyes, then crossing them and puffing out my cheeks.

She laughed. “Okay, but you’d tell me if there was something wrong, right?”

“Right,” I said.

“Well, I’m still making your lunch—” she paused, “and I’m packing an extra peanut butter and jelly.

“Sounds good.”

My mom made my lunch and kissed me before I went out the door to get my bike. “Are you sure you don’t want to just drive your car?” my mom asked.

“Yeah,” I said, pulling a jean jacket over my sweater, “I feel like a kid again when I ride my bike. Plus, it’s only a mile—and I’m helping stop pollution or whatever.”

“My little environmentalist,” she smirked, patting my head as I stepped into the garage. Once I heard the door lock, I paused until I was certain she was out of earshot. Quickly, I took off my backpack and pulled out my lunchbox.

“Bear,” I whispered to our old yellow lab who lived outdoors because my mom was allergic to anything with fur. “Bear, here’s a little treat.” I tossed him the two peanut butter and jellies.

“As I finished gunking up my skin with sticky foundation, I opened the left vanity drawer to dig out my hidden knife. I leaned back, cut the apple in half and quickly ate the smaller side. Tossing the other half into the trash, I headed back to the kitchen to grab the peanut butter and jelly that’d soon be inside Bear’s stomach.

“At least someone’s enjoying their breakfast,” I thought.

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“Have a great day at school, honey,” my mom said—appearing more animated—as I reached for my lunchbox.

“Yeah, okay,” I replied, giving her a kiss.
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“Yeah, okay,” I replied, giving her a kiss.
I went outside, waited for my mom to lock the door and gave Bear his breakfast. “I think you’re about seventy percent peanut butter now, Bear,” I said before riding away to school. After classes were over, I put on my helmet and rode my yellow bicycle the one mile home, soaking in the midday sun rays like a patch of Russian sage. The late-summer breeze whipped against my face as I forced my muscle-less legs to move faster and faster. Repeating the same mantra over and over in my head—a continuous loop like the spinning wheels of my bike—I fell into a trance-like state: “Faster, Samantha, faster; faster, Samantha, faster; faster, Samantha, faster.”

Every day I competed in this one-person race. I was constantly urging myself to ride faster each day, to pack an extra book in my backpack if I failed to keep up the day before—or to add another even when I didn’t. Today I brought my AP Biology book for the extra challenge of carrying its 331 pages. We were learning about homeostasis in animals; I thought it was fascinating that an animal’s body temperature will decrease, or its movements will become slower, when it needs to conserve energy.

I liked learning about animals in general. I was always watching those nature documentaries that show the same thing over and over again, only in different parts of the planet and with different species: animals searching for food and trying to mate before dying. The one thing I could never understand about these documentaries was why everyone always seemed to be concerned for the lone, emaciated polar bear or lion cub. No one’s ever concerned for the big, fat animals.

David Attenborough might narrate a shot of a lumbering polar bear with thick, white fur and say something like, “Here we have a healthy, thriving male.” How can he know an animal is thriving just by looking at it? The fat bears struggle too.

For them, each day is still an unknown—a question of if they’ll survive until nightfall. Yet, the skinny animals are what people care about. The bones poking through matted fur and the zombie-like movements are voiceless animals’ sign language: so long as people can see them, their silent cries for help are never unheard.

As I continued pedaling, numbing out the tightness in my chest and the burning of my legs, I began to feel dizzy and light: leaning backwards, my eyelids slowly closed. “BEEEEEP,” the sound of car horn awoke me from my semi-conscious state. I swerved the handles of my bike just in time to get out of the gray van’s path; my front wheel hit the curb, catapulting me on top of someone’s dead, orangish-brown grass.

With my backpack pinning me to the ground—trapped like a turtle flipped over by a sadistic six-year-old boy—I was flooded with the memory of a September day in fourth grade.

“Sam!” my mom called, “Remember not to take off your helmet, young lady! And be back before the streetlights come on!”

“I won’t, Momma—and I will!” I yelled back, hopping onto my hot pink bike. My parents had finally given me permission to ride around the neighborhood alone and I relished that newfound freedom. I hummed as I glided leisurely across the familiar, smooth streets, lost in a world of childhood imagination.

“BEEEEEP,” a car horn screamed at me as I rode through a stop sign, forgetting to look both ways before crossing the street. I turned my
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handlebars instinctively, toppling onto the fresh, green grass of a neighbor’s yard. When I opened my eyes, the driver had already slammed on her brakes and jumped out of her red car to run towards me.

I cried and cried as that lady with black hair pulled me into her arms, telling me it wasn’t my fault and reminding me of what a smart girl I was for wearing a helmet. I buried my red, embarrassed face in her shirt—the scent of vanilla perfume silencing my sobs.

The neighbor whose yard I’d fallen into came running out of her house too. She brought a first aid kit and a Hershey’s chocolate bar—both for me. I felt like a princess getting all that attention, so I pretended to cry a little longer until the black-haired lady finally drove me home with my hot pink bike in the backseat of her red car.

As I remained sprawled on the dry grass next to my yellow bike, I longed for the days of my childhood. I missed the freedom of stepping onto a bike and knowing that I could go as slow and as long as I wanted. I missed being held when I cried and bandaged when I was hurt. Silence surrounded me as I assessed my injuries. The mystery-homeowner’s door never opened and occasional cars rode by without stopping. Slowly, I wriggled my way off the ground, straightened out my bike and hoisted myself on top.

I sighed, tired and longing for the comfort of vanilla-scented perfume. I began pedaling: “Faster, Samantha, faster; faster, Samantha—.”

Once I made it home, I took off my helmet as carefully as I used to take the Wrenched Ankle or the Charley Horse out of the red-nosed man in the Operation game. I looked in my helmet and saw two tufts of red hair trapped inside.

Recently it seemed that everywhere I went, I left a little pile of my hair behind; I felt like a dog who couldn’t resist marking its territory. Picking up the clumps, I threw them into the afternoon breeze and watched as they floated away like the fuzzy, white puffsballs of a dandelion. I didn’t know how long I’d been losing my hair, but I was at the point of resembling a boy with a botched half-mohawk more than a girl.

When I got indoors, I turned on the news to drown out the silence of my empty house. Ever since my dad died and my mom had to start working more, I’d gotten used to coming home to nothing but the soft hum of the electricity.

I walked into the bathroom and undressed, itching for the relief of an almost-too-hot shower; I could never understand how anyone thought the sandy sludge of the Jordan River was more purifying than the rhythmic pulse of steaming hot water.

I soaked underneath the showerhead’s stream until my skin turned bright red and the windows became so heavy with fog that I couldn’t see out. I wrapped a white, yellow-tinged towel under my armpits and went to the sink to slather a thick layer of lotion over my dry skin. Wiping a face-sized circle into the steam-covered mirror, I stared at the reflection of my pinkish-red cheeks. Squinting, I brought my face closer to the mirror, moving my hands to my cheeks. Running the pads of my fingers along my skin, I thought I noticed tiny bumps like those on a recently-plucked chicken.

I tried to tell myself to stop, to remind myself that nothing good ever came from picking—but that never worked. Once I felt those skinned-chicken bumps, it was as if I’d been put under a spell: I had to pick.
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I dug and dug at the bumps, attempting to scratch them off or squeeze them out; it seemed that the harder I squeezed, the more I noticed something trapped inside, refusing to come out.

My skin felt hot as I ran my fingers along my face, determined to remove any last trace of a bump. I don't know how long I picked before I made eye contact with my reflection: two wild animal eyes stared back at me.

I froze and glanced at my arms, still poised and ready to attack the next bump. They looked white and fatter than ever—like the bloated belly of a dead fish.

Dropping my flabby, sun-deprived arms, I surveyed the damage to my cheeks. Both sides were oozing and inflamed; I felt sick and scared. The last time I'd picked this bad, I told everyone I'd gotten poison ivy on my face—I didn't know what my excuse would be this time. I slumped onto the hard tiles of the bathroom floor and closed my eyes: a vision of my two red cheeks hung in the blackness.

I thought of the time thirteen years ago when I would constantly wake up terrified from a nightmare I kept having. I remembered how safe I'd felt when I would yell to my mom and she'd run into my room, laying with me until I fell back asleep.

Lifting my head, I glanced at my phone lying on the floor.

With a shaking hand, I picked it up and dialed.

It rang, she answered.

"Mom," I said.