



Expressions

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While growing up within itself is a special experience for everyone, being a minority adds a layer of uniqueness to that story. Our minority voice magazine is the space for people of underrepresented communities to share their unique experiences and have a chance for their voices to be heard, no matter your race, sexuality or gender. The theme for our 2022 edition of Expressions touches on what it means for our student submitters to grow up as a minority, including what that looks like, sounds like and feels like.

Cover artwork by Jaylin Roberts

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Expressions is printed by Morgan Printers.

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Expressions is published once a year by East Carolina University students at the Pirate Media 1 Office, Mendenhall Ground Floor Suite G51, 1000 E. 5th St, Greenville, NC 27858-4353

Opinions expressed herein are those of the student contributors and DO NOT reflect those of the faculty, staff, adminstration of ECU, Student Media Board nor the University of North Carolina System.

Submission Guidelines

Expressions is currently accepting submissions for our next issue. Contributions can be any illustrations, poems, short stories, photographs or non-fiction works. All submissions should include your full name, major and classification. Please send all work to expressions@ecu.edu. Those pieces selected may appear in our next edition.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Hello, Pirates!

We, as humans, have many shared experiences in our lifetimes. Collectively, we have been through natural disasters, political unrest, global pandemics, and much more. Something that is a unique experience to each and every person, however, is growing up.

Whether good or bad, everyone has to go through the many stages of life before becoming an adult, and with them comes a multitude of hardships, memories, lessons learned, and overall experiences that shape who we grow up to be.

This edition of Expressions is a space for minorities to portray their specific and unique experiences relating to growing up through art.

As you flip through the pages that follow, recognize the experiences of those all around you. The experiences of those you relate to and don't. Use expressions to connect with your peers and reflect on your years of youth and now adulthood.

It has been an absolute pleasure working on our minority voice magazine, and I hope everyone who finds themselves connecting with our submissions, takes something away from it.

So, as the Editor-in-Chief of the Pirate Media 1 Print Division, I am proud to present our 2023 publication of Expressions.

Emily Peek
Emily Peek | Editor-in-Chief



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Photography





Again

Chikia McCoy

Poetry

Again ~

Thoughts running wild like a horse race
Crashing Into my mental like a drunk driver
Jumping into the unknown because you're
afraid to be alone

Caring too much gets u numb & for wat
Again.

Here I am, energy declining, not looking
where I'm headed

Feet touching the ground but not really
standing

Head high, but not for me, for them
Again.

Giving my all and no one acknowledges it
Reaching a hand to those who can't stay on
this roller coaster

Again.

Life hits me like I've been hit verbally so many
times

Pain, one thing I am fond of and can't let go

Pain, one thing I know I will forever know

Again.

Please, I don't want to feel like this

I'm tired and crave a type of intimacy out of
reach

Again.

The dead, forgotten and loved by strangers

Again.

People not realizing you're already at the end

Again.

No one knows you're dead but breathing.

Again.

Please just take me with the ones who did

Love me, cared for me, prayed for me,
wanted the best out of me

Again.

Wanting to be reborn but in a different world

A world unknown to no one, where the voices

inside my head are calm and not insisting, I
keep treasuring toxicity and forlorn activities
Again.

I want to be forgotten, unknown, unalive.
Again.

Mama should've chose the right decision and
left me inside.

Again.

I am alone but in sight, "loved" but not right,
treasured but for none.

Again.

Take me out , take me to the unknown, where
I can be undone.

This piece, "Again", describes my inner thoughts/
feelings towards my perception of the world and past
trauma.

I think this piece fits the theme, "Growing Up"
because everyone has a different outlook on how
life/their life should be. This piece is an opening into
how my life has been for a certain period where I was
struggling immensely. You can't put a label on life nor
of what you believe a certain situation should deliver.
Life has many changes whether you can keep up with
them or if you're ready for them, you just have to
buckle in and hope not to fall off in the end.

Again
Again
Again
Again





Growing to Glow

10

Elizabeth "Hestia" Henry
Digital Illustration



1 My piece shows a boy looking into the future and seeing that he's grown up to be a glamorous drag queen. This shows both LGBT culture and the feeling of growing up.

2 I wanted to make a hopeful piece for this theme because I think that looking toward a brighter future can help us grow through dark times in the present. The piece shows a boy looking to the other side of his room to see himself in the future, grown up and dressed in drag. Growing up can be scary, but it can also bring love and acceptance.



10 Letters, 1 Meaning

Onolunosen (Ono) Abhulimen
Monologue


"Who names their child Onolunosen?" "That's way too hard to pronounce!" "Too many syllables, too many letters, too much work to say." "Can I just call you by your middle name?" These were the type of statements my classmates muttered on my first day of fourth grade. I remember the day well. I had recently moved to a new state— a new school and all I wanted to do was make friends but how was I supposed to do that when I got comments like this every time, I tried to introduce myself. That was the first time I became truly ashamed. Ashamed of my name. Ashamed of the thing that defined me most.

Given to me by my grandfather in Nigeria, my name in English means "Those who do good things will reap good things in return" This adage for life lessons is unknown to most. Masked by what seems like the random configuration of ten letters. Nonetheless, it alludes to who I am as a person. Many have told me that my name is a tongue twister, too many syllables, too foreign, too unusual. It was always the name that took the most time to say during roll call. What made it worse was the fact that my name was usually at the top of the list, so I was often called first. I quickly got used to the "I'm—sorry—if—I—pronounce—your—name—wrong" speech. It got to a point where I would call out "here!" before the teacher got to my name to avoid the embarrassment of a name mispronounced or even worse— laughed at.

The above notwithstanding, let us fast forward to many years later. The conversations about my name have continued but this time more nuanced with meaning, maturity and deeper understanding from both my adult self and my inquirers.

Not a lot of people have heard a name like mine. You won't find it on a key chain or in the Urban dictionary. I am unique, I am special, I am different just because of a distinct and independent name I'm proud to call my own. I've known since birth that my name is not one commonly known. So why was it given to me? I'm often faced with the question "Why don't you have a normal name?". Its unfamiliar and separate but that's what brings it so much strength. Because it's so detached from other names it allows me to stand out.

So, we come back to the question why was my name given to me? It was given as a reminder of my Nigerian roots and ancestors who also had anomalous names like mine. It was given as a reminder of strength and individualism. A reminder that who you are and what you do with your identity is what holds truth. My parents were proud to write it down on my birth certificate with the deep belief that my name would be a part of my





destiny. They believed it would guide my path and act as a reoccurring reminder that kindness no matter how small is never wasted.

While my full name is Onolunosen, my sobriquet is Ono. Only the first three letters of my name but unfortunately even that got mispronounced too. "UNO" or "Ano" became a common nickname for a while, given to me by my peers and even some adults. It stemmed from my embarrassment to correct them every time someone pronounced it wrong. "Say that again?" "That's an interesting name." "Your parents really named you Oh no when you were born." I remember a time when I would beg my parents to change my name into something "regular". I just wanted a name like everyone else. My parents then sat me down and told me "We did not immigrate here from Nigeria for you to change your name just so it sounds better in someone else's mouth." They were right.

No matter what anyone calls me, I will always be Onolunosen. My name is the guiding light of my focused mission to do good to others and the shaper of my future vocation. I believe that doing good is one of the greatest ways to express love, empathy and changing the lives of people around you. My sense of identity is so well connected to my drive towards my life's purpose. Erik Erikson once said, "In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity."

It may be hard to pronounce but if someone can pronounce names like Ansel Elgort, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Arnold Schwarzenegger then surely, they can pronounce Onolunosen. "People will remember your name, and everything attached to it. Your name is an adage for life lessons. Your name is something you carry with you forever. Your name is something you can never depart from. Your name is Onolunosen. Ten letters, one meaning."

In recent years, I have had many conversations centered around the meaning of my name. These conversations have amplified my core identity as it relates to my name over time. They seek to understand, translate and draw meaning out of a name that seems so complex on paper. As these interactions evolve, I have found that true meaning eventually leads to cultural roots, origin, family, symbolism and most of all identity.

My essay/monologue details my experience growing up with a foreign name in America. It explains my struggles to accept and be confident in my identity throughout different parts of my life. I hope that many who have shared a similar experience can relate to my piece and be inspired to embrace their name. Some things I emphasize in my essay/ monologue is that maintaining self-identity is important because it strengthens your character. When we know who we are, have confidence in our self and are able to identify our purpose, we emerge as stronger individuals. Secondly, it keeps us unique and distinguishes us from everyone else. Throughout my life this wasn't something I knew until I truly learned what it meant to be proud of my identity. Readers will be able to identify a clear distinction in my feelings towards the beginning of the piece and the end of the piece. The contrast of feeling insecure and ashamed in my early life to feeling proud and confident later on exemplifies growth.



Let's talk

Candi Johnson
Poetry

I was a parent with no children.
I was a teacher with no license.
I was a designer with no style.
I was black with education so I should be thankful.
I had a roof over my head,
Food in my stomach,
And clothes on my back so I should forever be grateful.
No.
I grew up sheltered.
Now I'm called wild or immature for the actions I make.
I grew up being treated unfairly because I wasn't a son and I wasn't the young one,
I just so happen to be the oldest daughter.
I held my tongue because I am too young to know anything but called "grown as hell"
if I spoke my opinion.
Sorry mother in not trynna talk back I was trynna speak fact.
You lived in a Christian household because I did.
I can't mark my skin with tattoos but they could mark it with belts.
Called me crazy and hella lazy.
Didn't do the dishes and was hit with switches.
Don't have sex.
That's it.
I'm not ready for the real world because I never got to know it.
Go to college, get a degree, and then you'll know everything.
That cap.
I went from being 12 to being 19 real fast.
Jumped from having crushes to needing to know what I want to be in life.
Felt like I had so much weight on my shoulder now the world is weight on my shoulder.
How am I an adult but still know nothing.
I want to scream.
I want to cry to my parents but I know I'm too old for that.
It's 8 o'clock.
I got to go to class, struggle with that, then call my sister and tell her to slow down.



who are you foolin?

MJ Orlando
Lithography



To St. Lucia

MJ Orlando
Lithography



just take my two cents

MJ Orlando
Linoleum Relief



shadowed in thy faith

MJ Orlando
Linoleum Relief and Serigraph



Growing Up Gay

Victor Goins
Poetry

Growing up gay. There are things nobody can warn you about when you're growing up gay. Nobody can warn you about the way you'll feel different in any social situation you may find yourself in. The immense feeling of ostracization, even if it isn't intentional. You won't relate to "the boys" and their comments about the girls in your class. You will have to learn to over-analyze the room you're in and make sure you use the correct colloquial terms to not stick out. You'll be extra wary of the things you watch, listen to, and love for fear of your parents finding out. You won't go to the prom with the girl you'll eventually call your high school sweetheart. You probably won't even go to the prom with someone you like. You won't get to have the seemingly magical first love that'll eventually end when you both move away for college. Every scene of young love you've seen in the media will make you wonder why you can't have that. You won't relate to any songs you hear because the pronouns don't match. You'll get asked why you have so many girl-friends but never a girlfriend. You will suppress your personality and learn to mirror the ones around you. You'll learn to fit in because you will learn that people do not like people that are different. You will learn to ignore the comments that are said with a sly tongue behind your back.



Get on with it

Brian Jose Mendez
Multi-Color Etching



Growing Up Gay

continued

The most important thing that nobody warns you about is the way your parents will choose a book over you. Nobody can warn you of the things they'll say to you when they find out the truth. That they'll tell you that you'll never be successful. That you ruined their life. That you've disgraced the family. That you will get AIDS and die. No one warns you about the nightmares you will have about your skin burning off in Hell; because that's what your dad preached to you for 5 hours after he found out you were gay. You won't feel loved in church anymore, although you probably didn't, to begin with. No one can warn you for the endless sermons on the "lock and key" analogy that seems to target you directly. No one tells you that the dreams you have of being the next doctor in your family will be crushed because you no longer have a family.

Nobody will tell you that from now on, there is no longer a need to look for familiar faces when celebrating milestones. Nobody will tell you that you'll eat graduation dinner alone in a McDonald's parking lot. The first year will be the hardest. You will feel poignant when you move into your dorm and you're the only one who doesn't have their parents there to help them move in. The praise you used to receive for making good grades will vanish, after all, who would celebrate a failure.

No one tells you that you can make it without them. Nobody will warn you that blood truly does not equal family. You will make new friends, eventually the ones you could see being at your wedding. You'll learn to be independent and learn to juggle working and furthering your education. You



Founding Fathers

Brian Jose Mendez
Etching and Screen Printing

A decorative vertical bar on the left side of the page, featuring a dark red background with white geometric patterns including triangles, squares, circles, and lines. The patterns are arranged in a repeating, stylized manner.

Growing Up Gay

continued

will feel depressed when those friends are going to the football game while you are taking a shower for your shift. You will learn that making mistakes is okay because you don't have anyone to let down anymore. You will learn that your dreams are still obtainable even if you've missed one too many classes. You will learn that your worth is not determined by what others think of you. You will learn that not everyone will accept you, but you'll find the people that do. You will learn that you can still be a doctor, you will just be the first one in your new family. You will be the doctor you always dreamed of even if you're the only one attending your white coat ceremony. You will preserve, you will learn from your mistakes, you will take the MCAT, and you will pass. Growing up gay isn't something that I would wish on my worst enemy, but it is also something I would never change if I had the chance. I have learned to navigate a world not tailored to me. I have learned empathy for those who are different. I have learned to open my heart to those who are struggling. I have grown up to be the man I always wanted to be. I have learned that others' opinions of me do not dictate the person I am. I have learned that the world is unforgiving and scary, but you must take a chance. You will never gain anything if you stay stationary. I have lived a life where everyone believed in me and I have lived a life where not a single person did either, but I guess that is just life when you're growing up gay.



3/4

"PUNK ROCK PRINCESS"

Punk Rock Princess

Lithograph

Brian Jose Mendez

As someone who was raised in a culture so ingrained in the idea of male masculinity, I was robbed of ever having the chance to express anything outside of that. With femininity being something that was looked down upon in young boys, it wasn't until later in life that I was able to explore that part of myself. Having that kind of upbringing, I now explore those thoughts and feelings through my art in hope of bridging together that aspect missed out on. To do so I took on the identity of a princess. Someone who I felt represented what I was missing. Someone who would create that connection to femininity and gentleness that I have longed for, and that I felt was suppressed in a tower. These feelings and ideas are tools that I hope will help to heal that inner child that wasn't able to live in those experiences and I show that through my work.

My Life Matters

Tori Scott
Spoken word

They've tried to break me. With words that cut like the thorns on a rose. But, they didn't know- that I'm the rose that grows... from the concrete.

They've tried to erase me. They've tried to destroy me. But, like the sun, I rise. Like the phoenix, the ashes are the foundation in which I'm born. Like the mud in which they've tried to bury me under, that's where my lotus grows. My ancestors blood flows ...through these roots, buried in the dirt, present with every attempt to spite my existence.

I've been made to feel as if this soul that's housed within my melanin toned body is a disgrace. I've been told that I should be ashamed of my race. That this race is reserved for those with European features, forced to take several detours on the way to destiny- Made to feel as if white picket fences are out of my reach. That wherever I may go, that there's no security. No safety. No place safe enough for me to dream. You see. The stars twinkle in front of me but seem further than arms reach. Why can't I just be?



Me? Why can't I be me? Why do you despise me? Why do you feel the need to hurt me? Why can't I just be me?

Skin dark as night. Hair like wool. Back tired from the weight that I've been forced to carry. Lips bloody from having to refrain from speaking up and out. Hands bruised from doing the work that you refused to do. I'm tired.

I've grown weary but there's no time for rest. I have to outrun the stigmas. I have to outrun the status quo. I'm forced to run in the midst of having no place to go- because, "they" say that this isn't my home.

I've grown tired of having to bow my head when "they" speak but, to put one hand up, on one knee.. is seen as a crime against their being.

I just want to be. Free.

To flourish like a wildflower in the spring.

Free. To dream dreams. Free. To touch the stars that taunt me at day and disappear by night.

Free.



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Jala Davis
Monologue

I am a black woman.

But, in order to become who I am today, I had to go through a lot of different experiences in life - all teaching me different lessons that I have and will continue to carry through life.

As a little black girl, my mom would always do my hair in the morning before school and she laid so much gel on my hair you would have thought I ran to school but not a single hair was out of place. Growing up in predominantly white areas my entire life with very little people that actually looked like me, I was confused as to why my hair had to look like and all the other little white girls wore their hair in messy buns, no gel in sight. I could never come to school with my hair messy, because then it was nappy but when someone else did it, it was regular.

As a little black girl I was always told that even the most innocent of things were not going to fly for me. No lipgloss, just chapstick. No hoop earrings, just little diamond or pearl studs. No this, no that. I didn't understand at the time what was so wrong about lip gloss and hoop earrings. These were harmless things and just an integral part of what now to me is the black girl aesthetic. But now, as a black woman, I understand why these so-called aesthetic things were so looked down upon. As a little black girl, you're sexualized in ways that your young innocent mind can't understand and don't even think about.

As a little black girl, I experienced a lot of alone time. I was left to the side because some of the other kids didn't really want me in their circle. I didn't get it then but I get it now, I wasn't what they wanted. I didn't look like the rest of them so I was never going to be with the rest of them.

As a black teenager, I had to watch what I wore at all times. Nothing too tight, too short, too revealing, too nothing. It was almost like I had to be covered head to toe because my body wasn't built like the rest of the girls, I developed quicker. My hips were wider, my boobs were bigger and all the wrong people noticed how I filled out.


As a black teenager, I had to develop my "work voice" aka I had to code switch. I couldn't let my future employer know that I was black over the phone, my voice would probably be a dead giveaway and might not have slid in some environments.

As a black teenager, I had to walk on eggshells around so many people. My appearance caused people to be intimidated for no other reason than me being black. I had an "attitude problem" when I simply said what was on my mind or I found no reason to just walk around with a smile on my face. I couldn't act a certain way, walk a certain way, or really do anything because no matter what I did, I always had an attitude.

As a black woman, all of these lessons I've learned make a lot of sense. Although at the time I didn't understand why I needed all that gel in my hair or why I couldn't wear hoop earrings. I didn't understand why I wasn't able to be a part of different groups or why I had to speak a certain way in order to get ahead.

As a black woman, all of those lessons taught me to be the woman that I am today and for that I am forever grateful.

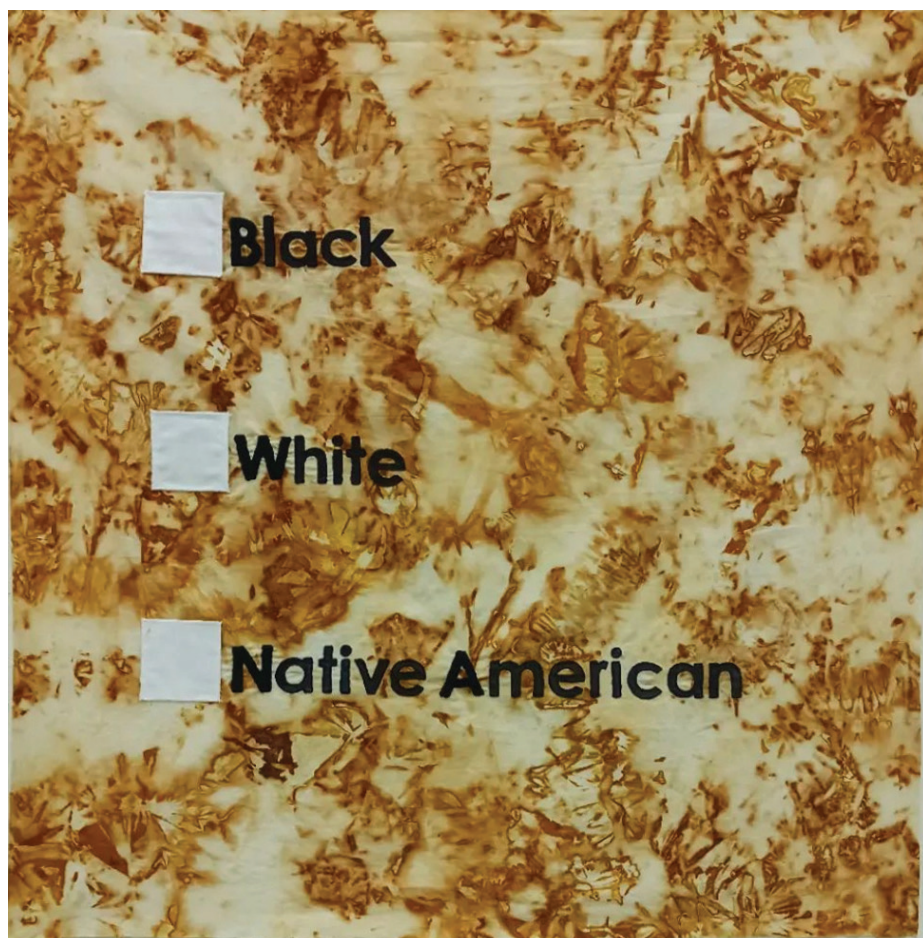




Choose One: **The Mixed Dilemma**

Andrea Bliss Cheek
Textile Design

Choose One: The Mixed Dilemma is a personal take I have experienced being Mixed in America. There are a set of race boxes on medical, academic, and government-mandated forms that are to be checked. This feature has been prevalent in forms in America since the 1700s and for the majority of that time, only one box is to be marked. This isn't an easy feat for mixed people when only one box is allowed to be checked in. We are being asked to pick parts of ourselves to identify with instead of the whole picture. I am proud to be mixed and I will not disregard any part of my heritage to better fit into societal norm.



18

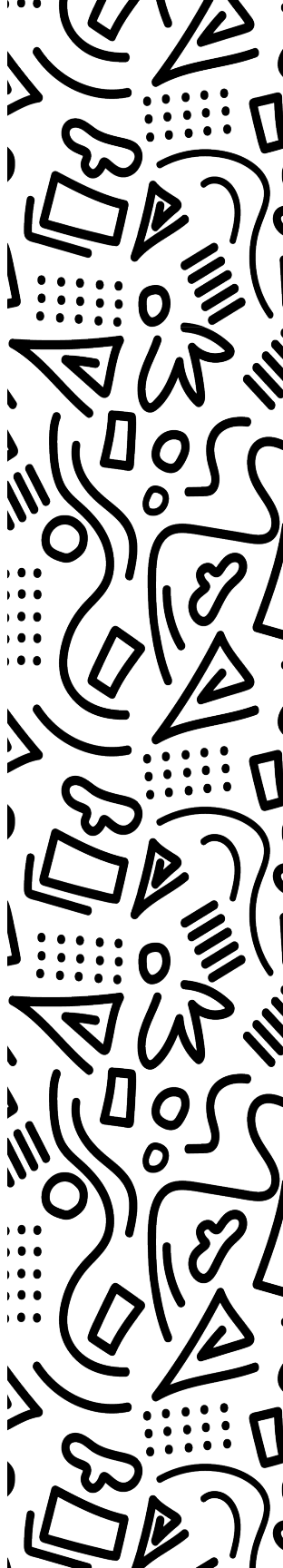
Rutendo Amanda Munedzimwe
Poetry

I had reached 18
The age I believed was the summit
I believed I now knew it all.
At 18, the shores of reality looked so blue, so soft, so gentle.
I believed if I could but reach for these lands,
I would hunger no more, thirst no more.
I surely was not aware...

At 18, hope smiled at me, promised me happiness
And I implicitly believed her.
Love came wandering like a long lost angel at my door,
And I at once admitted him,
Welcomed him,
Embraced him.

His quiver, i had not seen.
His arrows when they penetrated felt like a thrill of a new life.
I had no fears of poison.

In short at 18,
The school of experience was yet to be entered
Life's humbling, crushing, grinding
But her purifying lesson yet to be learned....



Friendward Bound

Zaria Richardson
Short Story

She was eight when we met, when she breathed life into me and my fabric stuffing. She gave me personhood and a voice, her own high-pitched one. Probably because of my white thread fur, she called me Snowball.

We would play for hours on end when we had the chance. I went with her everywhere too: from malls to the library. I was her cat, her baby girl, and her special friend.

* * * * *

One playtime, Friend grabbed me under my armpits as she always did and lifted me to face her. We locked eyes. She told me that I had superpowers.

"What kind of superpowers?" I asked her.

"Every one!" Friend said, giggling. She said that I could fly, grow big, change my body into different shapes. The list went on. To celebrate, she gave me something superhero-like. She found an elastic hairband and a cloth rectangle as big as me. She placed me in her lap. I felt her tug the band past my head and settle it around my neck. Another tug, this time behind me, and one end of the cloth was wrapped loosely around the band. With that, I was no longer Snowball but Super Snowball! I found that I didn't need to practice my powers. I already knew everything about them. I could hear frogs after rain when nobody else could. I could read Friend's thoughts and would know when she wanted to play. On my flights throughout Friend's house over furniture, between chair legs, and up toward the ceiling, I barely noticed her hands supporting me. One power that I didn't know I had and that she never told me about was my ability to not only read Friend's mind but feel her. I could tap into her thoughts at any time and know what she loved and what was bothering her. I could even send messages back to her mind.

So, when she felt lonely, I would send a pulse through her brain telling her that I

was ready to play. She would put on my cape, grab me by the waist, and zoom me through the air. I flew effortlessly, helping her stop the bad plush animals and plastic animals from taking over the world.

When the day ended, we would nestle into her bed. I huddled against her chest but kept my eye out for any evildoers and bad dreams.

* * * * *

As time went on and Friend grew up, our bond weakened. Ella the plush elephant said that that would happen. Friend would still cling to me at night, but her full love was gone. I continued to look out for her though, even if she didn't know it.

* * * * *

She's at college now, about an hour away. My powers have waned without her here to help me with them. She left me behind in her bedroom with her other plushies, saying that I'm safer at home. Since her bedroom door stays open, I can hear her parents talk throughout the house. This time, I hear them say that they're planning to meet Friend at college soon to give her the books that she'd ordered: they were sent to the house and not the college. I'm on her bed, talking to my sibling playthings, when my brain suddenly grows as sluggish as molasses. The world's a swirl of muted color for a moment before everything becomes vibrant again.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" I think I hear the plushies ask, but their voices are garbled and all I can think about is the pain. My super healing lessens the impact and I come back to myself for a moment before the feeling crushes me again.

This time, I put extra effort into my super mental strength and push the feeling to the back of my mind. I find myself panting. While I catch my breath, I poke at the mental pain and notice that the sensation's coming from somewhere outside my head. Following the mental pathway, I come to

my friend! But why is she sending me such awful feelings? Something about it makes my superhero instincts rise to the surface. Oh! I realize. She must need me! But how can I get to her? I wonder. I'm only a plush toy. I send what comfort I can through our mental link, but I can't help her feel much better. My powers work best when she's around.

I attempt to contact her mom, hoping that maybe she can help me, but it only makes my headache worse. I keep on trying, though. This is an emergency! But, instead of her, I get a shaking body and weak knees. Even my vision gets dimmer.

* * * * *

When I wake up, I feel velvety softness on my back. I look up and see a gray blurry image of Ella, the elephant plushie. "What happened?" she asks. I shut my eyes really hard and grab my head. She starts massaging behind my ears.

After a little bit, I say, "I tried to send a mental suggestion to Friend's mom, but it made my headache worse."

"Headache?"

"I've got a headache because Friend started sending a lot of distressing feelings to me a little while ago. I'm holding onto the link it created between us to comfort her. Her mind feels so sad that I don't want to just let go of it."

"Hmm..." Ella hums through her trunk.

"You know how you'd told me that your link with people is stronger the

closer you are to them?"

"Yeah?" I mutter. I forgot about that.

"Maybe you should try sending something to Friend's mom's or dad's minds only when they're closer to you."

* * * * *

The next day, my head's dully ringing when I hear the front door creak open with a vaguely suctiony sound. Since Friend's bedroom is next to this door, I thankfully don't have to use my superhearing to hear it. Footsteps thud on the other side of the wall separating the room from the living room where the front door is.

"I'll see you later, Tod," says Friend's mom, her voice slightly muffled by the wall between us.

She must be super close! I realize, and I try contacting her again. My head thumps harder. The next thing I know, I hear the suctiony sound, thumping going away from me, and an engine revving and moving away. I don't hear Friend's name, and no one's coming to me.

* * * * *

My next chance comes a few days later when I hear the rumbling roar of Friend's dad snoring in the living room. Softer, electric voices come from further away. Considering how loud he sounds, I



figure that Friend's dad must be sitting on the couch closest to Friends' bedroom. I gather up some strength again and send him a message. Maybe I can influence his dreams.

Something in my head snaps moments later.

My head feels muzzy. Everything's blurry. It's hard to breathe. Somehow, I stumble to the head of the bed and lie down against the pillow there. Something in his mind must've not been able to give in to my request.

I rub above my eyes. Next time, I tell myself. Next time, I'm gonna do it.

I close my eyes and use my healing powers to soothe my headache, which has been becoming more like a migraine lately. I can't even think another thought before I fall asleep.

* * * * *

I'm sleeping the next morning when I hear more clunking and thumping on the other side of the wall. Zippers ripple too. That's right, I think, They're going to meet her today. This is my last chance.

I furrow my brow and pool the last of my strength into my mental powers. I send a plea to Friend's parents to take me with them. Nothing changes. I want to faint, but I continue transmitting, for Friend's sake. Before my head splits in two, the bedroom lights are flicked on; and I breathe in the distinct smell of sweat and good food.

Friend's mom is standing in the middle of the room. She opens a drawer, fingers through some clothes, and picks a handful of colorful shirts. The drawer closes with a soft clunk. I keep transmitting to her. Soon, she starts looking around at various things in the room. Her eyes then settle on me.

"Hey, Tod, do you think we should take Lily's special baby to her? She sounded more stressed than usual on the phone," Friend's mom says.

"Sure, if you really think she needs it," replies Friend's dad.

Big hands grab me and lift me over a bag with random things like food, deodorant, and a pack of pencils in it. The mom settles me in the bag gently and makes sure that nothing's crushing me. Hands appear at the top of the bag and grab the fabric

loops there. I then feel like I'm being hoisted into the air again. I see the white, pebbly ceiling of the house getting a bit closer. The sky then replaces the ceiling in my view, and then the sky itself gets replaced by the tan ceiling of the car. I feel a rumble and the car starts; grainy voices and music blare from the radio. The music is changed to something softer, and then, we're off.

The entire trip, I never sever my connection with Friend. I'm flying to her faster than anything.

* * * * *

We're waiting outside her dorm room for her to show up. It feels like ages before I hear muffled steps coming down some indoor stairs and a swish as a door opens. I crouch inside my bag; I want my appearance here to be a surprise for her. She and her parents greet each other, and I listen to fabric rub against fabric as they hug. They tell her that after she takes up what they'd brought her to her room, they'll take her out to eat.

"Okay," she almost murmurs.

Her voice sounds flat. I hope she's all right, but my connection to her says otherwise. Plastic bags rustle as they move toward where I think she's standing. Then, I'm rising again as her hands appear above me and grab my bag. She starts walking back to her room. Her familiar gait's normally soothing. Now, it feels like it's slower than usual. She walks up some stairs, and I hear her open a few doors before she stops in a small, dark room. Although the place has a different scent from her room at home, it still has a hint of her along with the scent of someone else. Her roommate?

I freeze when my bag settles on a soft surface. Friend takes a few steps from me, and lights turn on. Things open and shut and plastic bags crackle. After about five minutes, she huffs and comes closer to my bag. A figure soon blocks the overhead light from my view, and a shadow darkens the inside of the bag a little. There's a sharp intake of breath. Fingers caress my fur. Before I know it, a hand's on my arm and then around my waist and I'm face to face with my dear friend.

But, what's happened to her? She looks

super sad, and there are bags under her eyes. I try to tap into her like I used to to see what's wrong, and I'm overwhelmed with apathy, worry, and weariness. So much weariness.

I can cry here in her hands right now, but I need to stay together, for her.

"Hello!" I tell her as cheerily as I can. I haven't directly spoken to a human in ages. If only I could make my threaded mouth really smile. Despite this, she seems to sense my smile anyway. I feel her shudder, so I float toward her, her hands supporting me; and I hug her, placing my head against the crook of her neck. She sniffles, her throat throbbing against me.

"I missed you so much," she whispers in a broken voice. I just hold her. She shifts and twists her body left and right before she falls against the bed with me in her hands. I continue to hold her. When she doesn't seem to be calming down, I use my powers to heal her, to help her feel better and happier. Through our touch, I search her mind and find memories of her staying up too late, worrying that what she was doing wasn't enough, and being disappointed with herself when she couldn't stick to her self-made schedule. I surge love through our connection and let her know that a close friend's here now to help her not focus on the bad side of things. And then, for the first time since I felt the mind-numbing pain days ago, my head hurts a little less.

After a while, I remind her that her parents are waiting for her. She finally pulls back, and I wipe her tears away with my tail like I've always done.

"Don't worry, I'll be right here when you get back," I say. She lays me down against the pillow on her bed and introduces me to a plush she keeps at college. The plush and I greet each other and tell each other our names. His is Virgil; he's a small wolf plushie. "Bye, Snowball," she says. "I'll see you later."

"See you later!" I say back. And with that, she turns off the light, closes the door, and locks it behind her.

I listen to her walk downstairs and talk with her parents until I can't hear them anymore. Through our connection, I can

tell that she's still hurting, but now it's a little bit less. I then inspect the room I'm in. Her blinds are barely open. I don't smell a lot of food on what's clearly her side of the room either. Wanting more information, I ask Virgil about what's been going on with Friend. When I tell him that I have superpowers, he quickly believes me. He says that Friend talked about me sometimes.

Virgil says that she's been acting a bit off for about a week now. She's complaining to her roommate that she's tired all the time and isn't eating as much as she knows she should except when she eats with her roommate at their dinnertime. She's getting homework done but is having a hard time concentrating on it. When her roommate's gone, she tells Virgil that all she wants to do is sleep so that she doesn't have to think any more anxious thoughts that day.

"Anxious thoughts? About what?" I ask.

"I don't know, but she did mention once that she thinks she could be having a mental breakdown. She hasn't said anything like that since, though."

I thank Virgil for his help, and we talk about lighter things like what's it like living in a house versus a dorm. We lie down against the pillow when we finish. My head feels like mush, and my body practically follows suit, melting onto the covers. I close my eyes and try to sleep; I want to regain my energy. That way, when Friend returns, I can continue doing what I've always done: protecting her from monsters and the darkness, even if they're coming from herself.

THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

Cherie Speller

Cherie, thank you for your constant advocating, involvement, and caring for us as individuals. We could not operate as we do without you.

Annah Howell

Annah, thank you for your continued dedication to us as a print division, as well as your many efforts to guide us and lead us. We couldn't ask for a better person to look up to in our work.

Tim Davis

Tim, thank you for your diligence and hard work through The Agency, and thank you for allowing us to continue with our publications.

Candy Griffin

Candy, thank you for your continued support and respect to the print division. We appreciate all that you do!

PM1 Staff

Staff members, none of this could be possible without you. Everyone's combined efforts and passion for what we do at Pirate Media 1 does not go unnoticed.

Submitters

To those who submitted, thank you. Thank you for trusting us with your thoughtful pieces of work, and for allowing us to bring them to life in Expressions. We would not be here without you!

Readers

To our readers, thank you for being a vital part of this publication! Without you, we would not have a purpose, and we appreciate each and every one of you.

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