

Portfolio 2 | Familiar Essay

Length: 5-6+ double-spaced pages (no more than 2000 words), excluding works cited

Instructions:

- Compose a full *familiar essay* as per the requirements above. For this paper, your audience is “well-informed layperson,” Imagine writing for *The Globe and Mail* or *The New York Times* and their readership. Consult course models in matters of style.
- For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published sources (essays, novels, short stories, poems, and so on, as per 2.2), one scene (2.1), and include a *Beginning* and *Ending* for your essay. Your paper must show *movement* between sources and ample *thought- reflection*. You may include a third source and/or close off your narrative with a second (short) scene that acts as a resolution for your *Journey*.
- Don’t forget your *epigraph*!
- Essays of this type do not ordinarily call for a “Works Cited” list; citation is normally done within the text, without parenthetical documentation. For this essay, omit the parenthetical documentation within the text; write in your sources. But include a “Works Cited” list at the end of your essay.
- Include an epigraph that helps illustrate your *Idea* or your solution.
- Bring one copy of your draft to your tutorial on the day your draft is due.
- Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements.

Please Note:

- You are not locked into a final scene or source until the portfolio is due. You may change your mind about your subject or source at any time. All Portfolio assignments must be completed once and included with your final submission.
- Remember the structure of *the Journey* and incorporate it into your work. Do you return and reintegrate (show evidence of growth and new understanding)? Remember, *the Journey* can be physical, spiritual, or both. Show us yours! Don’t forget the *moment of change*!
- Remember, if your *Journey* has not been completed, then this is not a good experience to discuss. Avoid traumatic, personal events, in favour of positive learning experiences. Avoid literally naming your paper “How I Learned to Be Awesome!” but that is the general idea. If you got to University, you *are* a success story. Tell us about it!
- Overall, your purpose in this paper is to use an example, experience, or moment from your life that illustrates a moment of growth or understanding for you. **Communicate this wisdom** to your audience using your *scene*, sources and *Idea* developed in prior assignments.

Too Stubborn to Die

"Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

- Dylan Thomas

I click the pedestrian crossing button once while waiting to cross the street, then twice, thrice, again and again in rapid succession. The light has been green far too long and not a single car has driven by. The fear that I'm wasting time, familiar since my mother's death, is starting to bubble up in my stomach. I tell myself I'll work on one of the art projects on my personal checklist, but I'm aching for my big, comfortable bed. I click the button again. *The road is empty, easy to jaywalk.* There's no reason to, though. Eager as I am to get home, there's no real rush. *Better safe than sorry.*

The light changes while I fumble with my earbuds and music, and I take a few steps before tucking it all away. There'll be plenty of time for that across the street at the bus stop. *Better safe than sorry.*

The car comes speeding towards me the way cars always do right before they slow down just short of the zebra crossing. It's a dark blur in the corner of my eye, and I don't pay it any attention.

It's still bright out. I'm wearing hot pink and orange and there's no other cars in sight. At this very moment, I'm as concerned about getting hit as I am about sprouting wings: I'm not. It wouldn't make sense. The button was pressed, the light changed, and the white man hasn't yet given way to the flashing red hand. My phone is in my pocket. Even if the car runs a red light the road is completely empty. There's no need to worry.

When the hood makes contact with my body the pain - which throbs through my body, vibrating through every cell like an earthquake - ends up taking a backseat to a louder, more insistent sense of shock. *Did that car just hit me?* For a moment, I exist outside of time. Reality is frozen into place while my mind questions it because certainly, *certainly*, a mistake

has been made. The universe has gotten things wrong. This can't have happened. I don't get hit by cars, other people get hit by cars. A part of me wants desperately to bring it to someone's attention and have them apologize and fix it. "Sorry Miss," they'd say, "you were right, this wasn't supposed to happen, we'll get it all sorted" and then they'd offer me some coupons or a complimentary gift. But the universe doesn't have managers or customer service and if anyone runs it at all they don't think they made a mistake.

Because it isn't all sorted by the time I find myself under the car, where I'm stuck while it continues to speed along the road. The shock, the denial, starts to shrink and the part of me that is cynical and bitter and angry at the world replaces it. *Of course I'd get hit*, I think, as if I didn't have enough to deal with. *After this, dad will never let me go out again*. I need to go home. *Maybe I can still catch the bus and dad won't have know*.

My first option is to try and get unstuck but a quick glance to the wheels spinning next to my head changes my mind. *A watermelon squashed by a hydraulic press. Pancaked bodies in the Looney Tunes stuck onto pavement. Tire tracks in dirty snow*. I'm being dragged along the asphalt, my hot pink shirt being ripped into ribbons along with my flesh underneath it. *Cheese getting grated. An eraser on sandpaper. A fork running over Jell-o*. For a moment, I marvel at the human body because while there is definitely pain and I am definitely aware of it, it's detached. *I'm in pain, but I'm not*. There is a glass wall between the sensations I should be feeling. *Keep your head up, don't let it touch the road*. The panic and the pain is there, but it's temporarily blocked off so I can focus on survival.

There's only two reasons I can think of for the car to still be driving. Either the driver doesn't know I'm under it, or they're trying to kill me. *Maybe they didn't see me*. I reach my arm up and try to reach the hood. *Maybe they're trying to do a hit and run*. I struggle to slap the surface, fighting the instinct to curl my fingers into a fist. *You can't fight a car, idiot, punching it won't do anything. Slap it, more surface, more sound, bigger chance they'll*

notice. And if they don't, somebody will, won't they? Somebody will see an arm under a car and stop it and I'll be fine and go home and sleep in my big, comfortable bed.

But the wheels continue to spin. I slap and I slap and the panic I've been barely keeping at bay starts to really settle in. *They're trying to kill me.* There's screaming. I'm screaming. Have I been screaming this whole time? *I can't die, I can't die,* I think on repeat. I have to take care of my dad, I'm the only person he has left. *This can't be happening, not now, I can't, I can't die.* I have people I want to see again, people I have to help, people I love. *I'm at my deathbed and still I value others' needs over my own.* An old habit I haven't kicked. I haven't wanted to live for a very long time, and while I've been trying recently, I've only been able to find worth in myself and meaning in my life through what I can do for others.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath comes to my mind, sitting on my shelf at home, half-read and then discarded because it left me feeling and thinking in a way that I've been trying to leave behind. There was this one passage where the main character, Esther, fails to kill herself:

When they asked some old Roman philosopher or other how he wanted to die, he said he would open his veins in a warm bath. I thought it would be easy, lying in the tub and seeing the redness flower from my wrists, flush after flush through the clear water, till I sank to sleep under a surface gaudy of poppies.

But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.

A few months ago, I read it for a bit, slipped in some paper and then put it down for a later that never came. Had I read it a year earlier, it would have made me feel like an egg cracked

open, my yoke exposed to the world. I would have devoured it whole. There's Esther, just a girl sitting in the tub, certain that she wants to die, unable to go through with it. Because she doesn't want to die, not really. She wants it to stop. The pain, the hopelessness, the misery that feasts on everything with a bottomless stomach until the world is colourless and tastes of dust. Whatever 'it' is, exactly, isn't the same for everyone, but that's what she wants to kill. The trouble is that 'it' won't go on its own, not when it has taken root in a mind and grown. As long as Esther can feel, she will feel 'it' and sometimes it feels like feeling nothing, like dying, would be better than to feel 'it'. I would know, I remember being that girl in the tub. Hell, I remember being the girl with the pill bottles, the girl with the belt on the chair, the girl on the balcony. "The trouble about jumping was that if you didn't pick the right number of storeys, you might still be alive when you hit bottom" Plath wrote later in that same book, words that I felt in my very bones for years before I read them. What I wanted to kill for so long was the misery that drenched me like an unwanted kitten in a bag, but the misery wouldn't leave without taking me with it. It wasn't the fear of death that made me hesitate, it was the fear that I'd stay alive and find myself more soaked than before. I didn't trust myself to pick the right number of storeys. And by the time I did read those words, I no longer wanted to.

I haven't felt those words since my mother died. Lemony Snicket, or rather, Daniel Handler, compares the death of a loved one in *Horseradish* with missing a step on a staircase in the dark, "Your foot falls down, through the air, and there is a sickly moment of dark surprise as you try and readjust the way you thought of things". It's a well-known fact of life that everyone dies, yet when a loved one passes we can't fully make sense of it. Somebody who was there and who had a place in our mind and a piece of our heart is gone. Now we have to try and find our footing in a world without them, infinitely more aware of our own tenuous existence and the overwhelming lack of theirs. My mother's death shook my

perception of everything and left me determined to do something other than wallow with that unidentifiable 'it' until I pick the right number of storeys and die. I resolved to try and want to live again, and not for others' sake but for my own enjoyment. I no longer wanted to die, but I didn't necessarily want to live, either. Life means feeling pain, feeling misery, feeling 'it'. I was trying to find what made life worth living, but I was uncertain about when, if ever, I would want to live again.

At least I'll be with her again I think, but the thought fills me with guilt, because I don't want to. Since she died I've wanted nothing more than to see her again, but now I find that I'm not ready to go yet. *It can't be my time.* The wheels are still spinning, and I can't help but see the tragic irony in dying when I no longer want to. *I want to live.*

The sensation takes over me completely once I recognize it, a deep, desperate desire to stay alive. *There are paintings I've yet to make.* I want to live. *There are stories I've yet to write.* And not for anybody else. *There are places I want to see.* I want to live for myself. *There are things I want to do.* But instead I'm stuck under a car grieving my own impending death.

I can't die I'm not ready I just started there's things I still have to do and see I just started I can't die this can't be how it ends it's not fair I've just started to like living again I've just started trying again I can't die like this I can't I can't I can't.

The thoughts continue, louder and louder until denial gives way to defiance, because I'm right. *I am not letting this kill me.* I have to be right. *Not after everything I went through.* I know that I want to live now, and I'm not letting go of that. *I'm not done here.* My mind is starting to fill up with fog. *I won't die.* It's getting harder to open my eyes every time I blink. *I refuse.* There's no force behind my slaps anymore. *I want to live.* I'm losing consciousness. *I can't die like this!*

Everything is growing darker but my light is strong. It is resilient and certain, raging like a fire, and it will not go out. The wheels still spin but I let my eyes fall closed. I know without a doubt that I'll open them again.

And I do. I open my eyes countless times after, with that fire still in me. It took me a brush with death to discover what makes life worth living, why people would ever persist despite the misery and pain. It's potential. The possibility that tomorrow will be better than today. The joy that could be experienced, the things that could be made and done, all of that is why we stay alive, and why we want to live. Not because of anything that is, but because of what could be.

Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. 1966 edition, Faber and Faber, 1971.

Thomas, Dylan. *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*. *New Directions*, 1952. Poets.org, <https://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night>.

Snicket, Lemony. *Horseradish*. HarperCollins, 2007.