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Heritage

You're stronger than this. There I was sitting on my kitchen floor nodding off with an energy drink in my faltering hand. *Strength comes from within.* Lights on, freezing room, 3AM. *You don't even know how strong you are. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger! Be strong!*

Another failed attempt at an all-nighter study session. Daylight came, I showered, and I was back shuffling between classes a few, short, hours later. Once again it was time for a quiz in my 6th-grade reading class. A subject I loved and a teacher I resented awaited me in the 2nd to last classroom of the "6B" hall. I waved at my best friend before landing on my assigned seat in the back of the uninviting classroom. Across the room we shared rolling eyes, smirks, and quick glances of chagrin during each assessment. The quiz was passed out and silence swept the room except for the sound of 20-something papers flipping over in unison. As I scanned the page, wrote my name, date, and class period, my face grew red. I sweat and began breathing faster, faster, faster – no, hyperventilating. Quickly the room became shaky. I couldn't make out any faces or words. No other thought surfaced besides, "I'm going to die."

Then, I woke up, lying in a cramped nurse's office on a cot against white brick wall.

“Has this ever happened to you before?” she asked in printed scrubs.

“Has *what* ever happened?” I asked. One moment I was in my classroom taking my quiz and the next I was in the nurse’s office. The in-between was hazy.

The nurse and my teacher conversed in the corner opposite me. Neither of them could put their finger on it, but I know now, I’d had my first panic attack.

God no, please don’t call and tell my parents. I was humiliated. I wasn’t even strong enough to finish a 6th-grade reading quiz. Strength was never a choice for my family. Excellence never an option. They didn’t have to say it, I could see.

Despite all odds, both of my grandmothers “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” Their work, and the work of my ancestors before them, was far from easy. Coming from poor, black, large southern families in the 50s, their success stories amazed me. Now, as retirees, they celebrate entire birth-*months* at resorts in Aruba or Greece. My mother came from a hardworking single-parent household that made her a more-than-mild workaholic. My apple didn’t fall far from her tree. I’d pushed myself to my breaking point, but I couldn’t let anyone see me break. I couldn’t disappoint them that way.

I spent the rest of the day dreading the talk I’d get at home. “Are you okay?” “What happened?” However, before I faced that, I trudged through hours of practices and rehearsals for my various involvements. I’d bounced back from my moment of weakness earlier and survived

the rest of the day. Survival, struggle, and strength didn't congest most of my peer's daily internal vocabularies though. I was twelve years old with the stress of a middle-aged air traffic controller. Comparing myself to the feats my parents had accomplished in high school (each with an entire grade or two skipped) made me fearful I couldn't live up to them. I felt like a failure. No one asked me to be just like them, but why couldn't I?

In her typical fashion, my mother waited until the day was done to ask me what happened. She always already knew but wanted me to rehash stories from my perspective. She wasn't disappointed though, she was concerned. She asked me why I didn't just go to sleep, as if she hadn't also been up in the latest hours of the night over her computer. I was tempted to ask her the same question, but I knew her "why." She worked to support me, my family, our household. Though I stressed and worried about my future as if my work had the same significance, it didn't. She reminded me no one checked 6th-grade transcripts and I reluctantly accepted that notion. However, it didn't last long. A couple days later, I was high-strung all over again. It was ingrained in me, and my mother's simple solution couldn't suffice.

I suppose celebrity super-fans turned stalkers have proved admiration can often fester into a bad thing. I admired the diligence that my parents and grandparents had put into their work all their lives. I wanted to replicate it, but I worried about my future as if I didn't have their support. Thanks to them I wouldn't have to struggle anymore, but like a sponge, I'd soaked up all their sacrifice, never allowing myself a break. So, I didn't. I drove my mental health into the ground for the entire year. The effects were clear to any outsider. I had lost my closest friends and given up my hobbies. I was depressed, anxious, and miserable, by my own doing.

I wish I could pinpoint my breaking point, but once secret panic attacks became a regular occurrence, it was clear I'd hit it. Every time I was asked if I was okay, I'd brush it off as, "No big deal." *Keep going. Stay strong.* If I'd heard Taylor Swift say, "sometimes giving up is the strong thing," sooner maybe I wouldn't have driven myself to burn out, but before I was stunned hearing those lyrics, something even more stunning happened.

My mom was asked to leave her job. After years of late nights, she was told to pack her stuff because her, "ideas didn't line up with the company." As she broke the shocking news to the family, we were even more shocked by her thrilled disposition. She was free from the toxic environment that had ruined any work-life balance she had. She was free! I was in awe watching her create a new schedule and pick up hobbies. She found work she genuinely enjoyed doing.

With her support, I followed in her footsteps. I quit the activities I wasn't passionate about and somehow, miraculously, I wasn't a pathetic quitter! Instead, I was happier. I learned to care and invest myself in my work without letting it define my value. I've seen the positive outcomes that come from setting personal boundaries outweigh the satisfaction of percentages and grades. While my ancestors may not have had the luxury of choosing enjoyable or interesting work, thanks to them, I do. The same strength that I used to tear myself down, I learned to channel into dedication towards prioritizing my well-being. The frequency of panic attacks decreased, and my head twisted back into place. My family remains proud of me, no matter what, and helps me avoid crippling comparisons. I can't say I'll never pull another all-nighter, but if my health is the cost of a good grade, I don't mind sleeping, knowing life goes on.