

A Flawed Spirit

Adapted from John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*

“Dee Dee Deet! Dee Dee Deet!” The incredibly annoying sound of my alarm clock sent my particularly nice dream scattering in a thousand directions. The darkness of the sky outside only supported my reasoning that it was much too early for any human being to be awake, and armed with this knowledge I stuffed my head under my pillow and decided to wait at least until the sun rises to allow myself to be coaxed out of my downy comforter, as one can only be expected.

“Genevieve! Gen...Get up it's five thirty already!” The obnoxious sound of my roommate's voice accompanied by a whack across the face with a ridiculously hard pillow penetrated my dozing thoughts, but I still refuse to budge. I knew what came next.

“GEEEEENNNEEVVIIIIIEEVVEE!!” Each syllable of my name is emphasized by Phoebe, my roommate and unofficial best friend, with each shake of my shoulders.

“All right, all RIGHT!” With this I reach over to disengage the alarm button, and then allow myself to roll off the bed onto the floor, with Phoebe watching over me shaking her long red hair with disapproval. Satisfied with her success, Phoebe returned to the bathroom to finish her morning pampering, as I drag myself across the floor to hunt for my leotard.

“I swear Genevieve, one of these days I'm going to buy one of those alarm clocks with wheels that you have to CHASE!”

“If you do, it'll be the LAST thing you ever do.” Needless to say, I was not a morning person. Thus begins my morning routine at Dorescian School for Girls, dorm room 18.

“Remind me again why I agreed to let you drag me up at this ungodly hour every day?” The question I’ve asked Phoebe every morning since the day we joined the boarding school tumbling team, which I had tried out for only because of Phoebe’s urging, and we both happened to love. However, I would never tell her that part, because I knew if I ever did, I would be treated to one of her patented smug grins accompanied with a “What did I tell you....”. Phoebe loved it when she was right and someone else was wrong, which happened more frequently than I ever cared to admit. Phoebe chose not to respond, but instead gave me a knowing glance over her shoulder. I quickly threw on my leotard and brushed my thick dirt brown hair in a ponytail, then went to the sink to splash some ice cold water on my face in a final attempt to wake myself up.

“Why do you put on make-up before practice? You know you’re just going to sweat it off anyway,” I say as I throw my gym bag over my shoulder, and watch Phoebe finish the last stages of her morning primping. Not that she needed make-up at all, with her waist length wavy red hair, bright green eyes, a smile that belonged in toothpaste commercials, and the gymnast body that the majority of the population at Dorescians hated her for, Phoebe was easily the most gorgeous girl in the school. I, on the other hand, Phoebe’s other half, was easily the plainest.

In response, Phoebe just shrugs and grabs her things before we head out the door for our 5:45 practice.

As a kid, I had never had any ambitions to be a gymnast. It was my mom who first got me into it, and I quickly fell in love. After she died I had quit, and never thought of it again. My father had worked for the Peace Corps, which sent him all over creation for sometimes years at a time. Since I had never really seen him much that didn’t bother me, until he was all I had. My mom had always wanted to move back to our homeland in New

Zealand, so when my dad offered me choices of boarding schools, I had chosen Dorescians. It was there that I met Phoebe, who quickly took me in and showed me the ropes of the school. She had always been fascinated by gymnastics, but never tried out. When I told her my history, she insisted that I try out again with her. It had been years since I had lessons, so I was reluctant at first. However, by God's good graces we both made the tumbling team, and had been actively involved ever since. Phoebe was a natural; I believe she was created for the sport. It was only over her that my talent didn't surpass.

I remember that practice as being the same as any other, the same grueling exercises, warm up drills, and the exhilarating routines. Phoebe called gymnastics "the best high there is", and I couldn't agree more. There was nothing like it in the world. There was no place where I felt freer than in the gymnasium, somersaulting across the mat feeling adrenaline rush past my ears. I remember being worked harder at that practice a little more than usual, because I was panting heavily with sweat running down my face by the end. Phoebe, on the contrary, remained perfectly poised, with only a slight pink tinge added to her cheeks from the exercise. I flopped on the floor, and mentally prepared myself for our traditional end-of-practice pep talks. These were becoming more and more frequent since our team had actually been winning competitions, and were preparing for the Championships that would take place in the following weeks. Phoebe flopped beside me, or rather, seated herself gracefully. Just about every move she made was graceful.

"Good work today girls!.." Coach began, and it was at this point that I usually drowned her out and focused on making my mental schedules for the rest of the day. Coach only got to the important information near the end.

"...tryouts from last week..." Suddenly I perked up. How could I have forgotten? The Championship routine had required a lead tumbler, who would be the center, the one

the scouts would be looking at. I remembered the auditions held the week before, the auditions that I felt I had excelled in. I knew it belonged to me, that I was sculpted for this opportunity. Since my grades were mediocre, my only chance for a scholarship lay in gymnastics. I listened in for a few more words.

“...you all did very well...” Was it really necessary to drag it on like this? I felt the tension building around the gym, nearly choking us.

“...goes to Phoebe.” I felt something like a lead ball drop in my chest, dragging down my hopes and pride. Who was I kidding? Had I ever outshined Phoebe in anything since I came to the school nearly four years ago? That was my chance to show my worth, to feel significance for once in my life, and it was gone.

“I don’t get it Gen, you were amazing at auditions!” Instead of allowing Phoebe’s words to soothe me, her consolations only stung, deepening the void in my heart that had only grown as the years as her best friend had passed.

“No it’s okay, you deserve it.” I would just accept and move on, just as I’d always done. Accept. She was better, she is better, and I couldn’t live up to it.

The next few practices were a blur, my movements were mechanical. With each motion my feelings buried deeper and deeper, until they vanished into a gap so far beneath the surface that they could never be uncovered.

The day of Championships arrived sooner than anticipated, but we were ready. I could feel my nervousness creep up my spine, but I shook it off. Soon my muscles warmed to the movements, and with each synchronized step I felt my fears fade. This was home. Between flips and somersaults I caught glimpses of the audience, their faces rapt with wonder. I performed as I’d never before, until I could no longer see what was happening around me. Surely they would see, surely the scouts would notice, they had to. The big finale,

Phoebe made her way to the center, and balancing on two dancers' shoulders, flipped up into the air. I moved back to my position, ready to catch her. Then I saw him. He was surely a scout, for I know I had seen him before. His eyes were captivated as he watched Phoebe, she held all attention. I had felt jealousy before, but nothing like this; this burning hate that rose up and seized me without warning. I could not let her take this from me. Without my mind's consent, I felt myself move a fraction to the right, just enough. A flash of red, a snap. The auditorium became silent, echoing that unnatural crack that I knew was her back. It was over. The world stood still, I could see nothing but her face, her eyes locked on mine, those fierce green eyes that filled with understanding. Then they closed. I could do nothing but stare at what I had done, what I had become, what I had lost.

Phoebe was hospitalized, and died two months later of complications from a broken back. I stayed at the hospital until I was finally allowed to see her. I remember standing by her bed, holding her hand. I did not speak, did not plead forgiveness. But in her fiery eyes, I saw it. And that was all I needed.

No one blamed me, these things happen in competitions, just an accident. But I know the truth, I know what I did. I'll never know if it was intentional, but I know the guilt that has plagued me ever since, refusing to let me go. Her forgiveness is all that allows me to keep going, to face each day anew.