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The Collision

Dark is the earliest memory. We are birthed into this life, leaving the dark, but it follows desperately, longingly. The dark is more memorable than the light.

When I came into this world, I rejected it. My lungs could not suck in the oxygen that laces the Earth; it would not be accepted. Before the ambulance reached my parent's rental home, I gasped—longing for that rush of air cascading down—and my lungs accepted, finally accepted the oxygen.

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Oxygen as a liquid is a pale blue, the color of Dixie Dragons Soccer Club. I was coerced by family and friends to join the team. I had quit the sport three years prior, but I was convinced by others that I missed playing, and partially yes, I felt like I was missing out by not playing.

My family's oxygen is soccer. We breathe only soccer. Other sports matter, yes, but soccer is a religion.

I've heard rumors that in the ancient times, the game of soccer was played to determine who should be sacrificed to the gods. In ancient South American tradition, the captain of the losing team was to be executed, sacrificed to appease the ancient Gods. The ferocity of the game has not since died with it.

The game was only for fun if we lost, at least that's what my parents told me. We play to have fun. But winning, that was something entirely different. If you won a game, the celebrations

and cheers and compliments were more than just “having fun”; it was addictive. We craved that in everything we participated in. It was more than a game. It was life.

I honestly didn’t miss that part of the game; I gave up on trying to win. As the youngest, I lost a lot to my siblings, so much that I told myself not to care. What I did miss was the camaraderie of having a team. I missed the thrill of the game, for the one-on-ones with the keeper. I also missed getting paid by my dad for making goals. Mostly that.

Without a second to back out, I was signed up for the Dixie Dragons and was at their practice; I was severely out of place, and out of shape. It was evident from the judgmental glares that just because my mom paid the club fee, guaranteeing I would play, didn’t mean I was a teammate, or a part of them. I was an outsider. I was alone. I was ridiculed by coaches and teammates for not “keeping up”.

I was utterly alone. So, I went to the dark for solace.

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Dark is what I remember most. I remember its swallowing embrace. Afterall, we spend half our days doused in it. Memory banks are half dark. We sleep in the dark and let it sink into all the crevices of our minds, touching all our thoughts, caressing the good ones and tearing away the harmful ones.

My solace came from dousing myself in the dark. I’d lay in my bed each night and let the dark curtains drape over me physically and mentally. I often catapulted myself off into the dark abyss, not knowing if and how I’d make it out. Sometimes, I didn’t even know I had.

At the bottom, I sat and listened to my chaos of thoughts of inadequacies swirling around me, mocking me. Until a shadowy hand ushered them away and lifted me up and led me out of the abyss. It would pat me on the back and encourage me on.

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Well, I had to go on. I couldn't quit. It had only been a week. No friends still. They made it clear that I was an outsider. It made sense, I thought. They had been together as a team for multiple years. Change was new for them. Coach said that change was welcome, at least he said something like that to my mom, but he didn't act that way. Maybe hazing was his way of "bettering" my developing skills.

I mean, I wasn't that good anyways. I had a significant gap in between my years of playing. And the girls knew that. I had taken a break from soccer, but those three years were a crucial time in developing skills that I had missed. Before I even met the team, I was confident that I could catch up, but now, I wasn't so sure. I seemed to be severely behind, or at least I felt that way. What I needed was someone to take their time to show me step by step the difficult footwork, instead I was shown once briefly and expected to pick it up right then. I spent a lot of nights letting my frustration wash over me and crying because I was failing. I spent a lot of practices trying to cover up my frustrated tears. No one really stood close enough to converse with me anyways, so hiding wasn't an issue. It was even easier to hide in the darkness.

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Darkness is often associated with death and isolation, which has the stigma to be feared. As children, we fear the dark. Night is a terrifying time. But why? What if we grew up fearing the light? What if the universe ran off of cold instead of heat? What if we had to have cooling balls of gas as our suns instead of heat? Would we have thought of dark differently? Would we have worshipped the dark like we worship the sun? Would our predecessors have had dark gods instead of sun gods?

I realized early on that we need the dark. Without the dark of the night we wouldn't be able to see the stars. Annie Dillard puts it this way, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."

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I demanded my body to run, to catch up with the other girls, but I was always left behind. I demanded myself to be better at the drills Coach would run. I demanded that I not care about the girls isolating me by action, and by conversation. I often tried to hide the tears that swelled from everyone: Coach, the other girls, and my mom. I didn't want to be a quitter again. I had already received a plethora of ridicule for quitting soccer once by more than just these girls.

By the end of the first week of practice, I was worn out emotionally and physically. Uncertainty hung heavily over my head, as did the massive word FAILURE. Fear and sheer spite kept me going back, despite the massive cloud following me. I guess I didn't feel as alone with the dark cloud gathered above me.

I also found that I enjoyed watching the sun approaching the end of world. I found beauty in the sight, not because of the colors, but because of the lack thereof. The lack of light meant practice was over.

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Over the rainbow, a song meant to signify what is earthly beauty. It is peculiar to me that darkness isn't included, but not others see it as I do.

Darkness is a beauty, is it not? It lacks color and light, and yet, it is awe-inspiring. Being in a cave with absolutely no light is an ethereal experience. You feel swallowed, embrace, whole, and free in those dark moments in a cave, completely isolated from sound and light.

We think that when it is dark that our eyes cannot see, but they do see. They see space taken up by a force beyond our basic human comprehension.

The darkness is also a friend. It pours into the empty space of isolation. The embrace of the darkness is more comforting than white space, the absence of content. There seems to be a lot of white space between individuals—multiple blank slabs separating us from mere humanity.

Is that why we can't love each other? Is that why we have a hard time accepting one another for who each individual is? The white space eats up love and replaces it with ignorance. The dark accepts all and fills everything it touches with love.

The dark is always willing to embrace and comfort, and it is a lasting memory. The longest memory is the truest friend. It doesn't have requirements to meet. But people do. People have "conditions" and "prejudices."

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The prejudices they had for me as an outsider kept me from being called my actual name. The first season with Dixie Dragons, I was just known as number eight. I was hardly ever called anything nice. I often thought of Thumper saying, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all." Evidently, I was the only one who had watched *Bambi* growing up. I never said anything back to them. I just took it as graciously as a thirteen-year-old could. In *silence*.

Coach often added to the growing list of spiteful names that had become mine. He took pleasure in making me an example in front of the team.

I heard the sniggers and the laughter. I heard the roll of the eyes as they squeaked upward, then downward.

I was aware, but with no control. I was too new. I was too naive. I was too weak. My team had conditions and prejudices. I unfortunately wasn't "skilled" enough to make their conditions, and unfortunately, I met all of their prejudices.

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Conditions and prejudices are what keeps us from seeing the beauty in others, that's the same for darkness. Our own fears and prejudices teach us to dislike the dark. The dark has so much to offer. It fills in all the cracks, it creates contrast, it creates the space for stars to shine in their space of glory. The darkness does more good than we realize.

The dark places I went to recover from the animosity that greeted me daily was a haven. A retreat that became more like a home. A friend always welcomed me there. The dark place I went to wasn't a negative experience. My thoughts and feelings may have started in the dark and I felt alone and useless, but I found meaning there. I found that the dark could work for me, not against me. That's what it was trying to do all along. The dark was sometimes a literal dark space. My closet with all the lights off. And sometimes the dark was figurative, being lost in my own mind, feeling swallowed by the pressures and judgements surrounding me. Entering into a figurative dark place showed me that I wasn't alone. It was in those moments that I learned to rely on God and let him direct my path, while not knowing where I will step and what I will step on. I learned to trust him. And in the dark, I learned that comfort resides there.

As I said, the darkness fills in all the cracks, the parts of our heart that have been shattered. The dark is the gold that fixes broken china. It fills in the gap and makes us more valuable. It helps us to forget the hurt, but keeps the scar as a souvenir, a reminder of a victory. It takes the spotlight from the hurt and covers it in a Band-Aid-like embrace.

To heal properly, one needs the dark. One needs isolation to see the hurt and to see what can be done to fix the hurt and the dark leads us to our healer.

The dark cannot hurt an individual. Its touch is not deadly. We think it is because of millennia long beliefs and prejudices that dark is death. Dark is bad. Dark should be feared. If our ancestors had only known that the dark is more friendly than the light, they wouldn't have need to fear.

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Fear. That's all that I felt.

My first game back on the field, I was absolutely terrified. My palms and armpits were sweaty, my breathing uneven, and my legs shook vehemently and violently as I tried to lace up my cleats. I went slower than usual and left myself open to being shamed. Again.

I kept thinking that I didn't want to make a mistake. Mistakes were heavily punished by Coach and by the team. When I crossed the white line onto the field, I purposefully let myself be guarded by the other team. Coach screamed at me to move, to get open. I hesitantly ran closer to the sideline, no one was there. I thought *don't pass it to me, don't pass it to me*. The center midfielder made brief eye contact with me and passed the ball with the slightest eye roll visible. The ball rolled and rolled in a kaleidoscope of black and white. My cleats were melted to the turf; I was afraid to go to the ball, to meet it in the middle. I waited instead. My wait was my mistake, my ultimate fear.

The opposing team, namely number eleven, ran right in front of me and trapped the ball, then started gracefully dribbling down the field. The center midfielder yelled something insulting to me as she raced back to defense. Coach subbed me out and screamed at my slumped frame to "come to the ball, don't let the ball come to you!"

When I went to sit on the bench, I was greeted by stacks of soccer bags as a barrier, separating the few substitutes and the very edge of the bench. I sat on the end, one butt cheek hanging off the ledge. I stared at my cleats the rest of the game, praying I wouldn't have to go back out on the field. I may have had a team, but I still felt I was opposing two teams, not one.

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On the second day God commanded that the dark be separated from the light. He commanded a greater light to rule the day, and a lesser light to rule the night, thus separating Night from Day.

On this day Night was hushed. The dark majesty of the sky was ruined by the appearance of the moon and the stars. Night resented the moon and the stars for stealing his vastness of indigo-black for their consistent sparks of light, bringing more light into his sky. "How could this be?" he thought. "God separated me from the day to have my own realm of glory. Why would he do this?"

Each sunset, as Night snuck up on the earth, he pulled his swirling dark robes around him and his planet, hoping to beat the moon and the stars to the Earth, hoping to have his darkness to himself, hoping to swallow the inhabitants in his glorious form. He noticed that every sunset the stars and moon would crash his event, sending fragments of light to the earth, begging for attention.

One night, when Moon was shining annoyingly bright, Night confronted her and asked, "Why do you steal my dark away? God separated Day from Night, light and dark. Why do you insist on ruining the dark I place on the earth?"

She looked at his desperate frame and shook her head and said, "I know not. I only know that God asked me to."

Night left the moon and went to a cluster of stars and asked, “Why do you steal my dark away? God separated Day from Night, light and dark? Why do you insist on ruining the dark I place on the earth?”

The stars glanced at each other awkwardly and muttered, “We know not. We only know that God asked us to.”

Frustrated, Night left the stars behind and sulked until Day approached. Day saw that Night was disgruntled and frustrated. As she got closer, she asked, “Night, why are you upset?”

Night sighed and said, “I just want to be dark. I want it to myself. You get your light all to yourself. Darkness doesn’t interrupt you, Day. But the stars and the moon constantly interrupt me.”

Day placed a comforting hand on Night and said, “Actually, darkness does interrupt my time. My sun’s rays can’t reach everything. Pockets of dark litter the earth, even when I place my sun at high noon.”

She paused and an idea came to Day. She asked, “Have you ever heard of shadows? They are the reverse of stars and they are found all over the earth.”

Night looked at Day perplexed. He asked, “And, you’re okay with it?”

Day smiled and said, “Of course. Part of our job is to give contrast between the light and the dark. That contrast is ever present and always there. It would be quite boring if it was all light all day, and it would be the same for night; boring without pockets of light.”

Night smiled back, grateful for Day. He left her slowly, allowing her light to soak up the earth, but Night watched as he saw shadows formed in patches, dotting the earth, smiling at his newfound brothers and sisters. He went home and waited for sunset. Once it came, he grabbed his swirling dark robes and gently placed them on the planet. He smiled at the stars and the moon

who joined him and thanked them for doing their job. The stars and the moon smiled brightly back.

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I was back to where I started. Club season.

A year. It had been a year on the field. I had survived high school soccer. In fact, I excelled. My high school team, while not perfect, had allowed me to be me and let me grow. I hadn't been fully accepted by the coaches, but my teammates sincerely cared for me. It was a striking contrast to that of my club team.

When high school season ended, club season started. I hadn't seen my team in five months. I had seen a few on the field during high school games, but that time they were my actually my opponents, but that wasn't a new feeling for me.

Their jeers weren't any different, just this time it was to my face and not behind my back. I had gained a sliver of respect from them when they realized that I was in the lead for highest number of assists for my junior varsity team. And most of them saw that firsthand, rather than on paper. But to them I was still an outsider. I was the "new girl" that they didn't want. It had been the same girls on the team for four years or so.

Practice didn't change in those five months apart. I still ran alone, and did drills with the perverted assistant coach, who liked to make sexist jokes daily, mostly to me. No one greeted me enthusiastically when I showed up for practice. Everyone else got hugs and life updates. I sat by myself lacing up my cleats in the shadows.

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Shadows are the reverse stars, they're on the Earth, not in space, and they provide dark, rather than light. Most humans don't realize the comfort they find in the shadows.

On a hot summer's day shelter is found underneath a tree. It steals away the sunlight and replaces it with a cool environment. A haven from the scorching, burning, discomforting light.

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Lightly, I joked that I had survived a year with this team. Success! I mean, success in that I didn't quit.

The start of the new season was a start of a lot of newness to process. There were two new teams added to the Washington County Soccer Association U16 roster. That meant more games and more competition. We also got a new goalkeeper. I wasn't the newest member of the team. She didn't have to worry about the other girls. She mostly worked with our assistant coach doing drills. The change was welcome for me. It shifted the attention off of me.

A couple games into the season we were facing one of the many Bombers teams. Half of the season's U16 club teams were under the name Bombers. A club team that had become too popular, and too arrogant, and highly intolerable for the Dixie Dragons.

One Saturday afternoon, we had a game scheduled to play against one team under the name "Bombers." There was a breeze blowing that kept us cool and blew off the rising heat coming from the turf at Dixie High School. As we were warming up, I heard one of my teammates gasp saying, "Oh my gosh! It's her!" All the other girls looked to the opposite side of the field and started muttering how much they disliked the her that was pointed out.

I was even included in the conversation when I asked, "Who is she?" They had no qualms allowing me in for a moment to spread hateful gossip about the other team's goalkeeper. She was around six feet tall and had firetruck red hair. She also had a sneer tattooed on her face. I felt bad for the heinous things the girls were saying about her, but I was ecstatic to actually be included in a conversation that wasn't negatively directed towards me. I felt for a brief moment

that I had been bonded with them through gossip. That brief bond ended as the whistle blew, but we were together for the first time as a team. My team made it a goal to make the goalkeeper cry by the end of the game. I felt that it was an awful goal, but I couldn't even let myself speak up, because I was afraid of losing that tiny bit of camaraderie I felt. I just voiced my veto in my head instead.

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Instead of being in the light, being in the dark is what made me feel more accepted. I had company in the dark, one that didn't care about how I looked or how good enough I was. It just swept me into a hug. Once I stopped caring about what others thought of me, once I stepped out of the spotlight of judgement, I felt more complete. I felt proud of myself. I was proud of what I accomplished, and the dark showed me that; not the light.

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Light isn't what I remember. I don't remember much of that game, except for one crucial moment. The collision.

I always remember the dark before I remember the pain, but I do remember isolation and loneliness before the embrace of darkness swept me away.

I remember the whoosh of the wind pushing against my back, willing me to run faster. I remember the tall figure with a tornado of red swirling around her head. But mostly, I remember tunnel vision. The black illuminating the ball in front of me. No one or nothing would stop me from getting the ball. I felt exhilarated with the chance to score. I had tuned out the incoming keeper and focused on forcing my legs to move faster to get to the ball first. My vision went to focused and vivid to black, I don't remember if I made it to the ball.

Dark was all I saw. I didn't feel the actual trauma of two bodies colliding. I didn't feel the force of her tall frame push me down. I did feel my teeth crash down on my own flesh, and I saw darkness.

A friend. Something that was familiar.

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A familiar thought I often think of: Simba in his innocence, wondering about the places the light does not touch, the land that isn't his, or rather the land he'd like to explore more.

"But what about that shadowy place?" Simba asks.

"You must never go there." Mufasa responds adamantly.

But we all know, he goes there anyway. Is it out of curiosity? A desire to seem brave? Or because the darkness cultivates a friendship long desired, and always needed? Mufasa knows that the hyenas inhabit the shadowlands, he assumes that they are unfriendly and dangerous, but what if they are the only ones who would accept you and take you as you are? Outcasts don't cast out the lonely. They become outcasts together. That sounds more desirable than "all that the light touches," which is vast and empty.

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Empty, I felt empty, and weightless. I let the darkness consume my being for a millennium.

My eyes tried to flutter open, and immediately shut at the sting of the light. I rolled onto my stomach trying to open my eyes again with black gathering in the corners of my vision. I pushed myself to my knees, my sight tracing the blades of fake grass. I slowly got to my feet. I vaguely remembered a whistle, stopping time. I shook my head and kept it facing down, trying to

figure out the colors of the turf. I started to feel pain coursing through my tongue. I checked to see if I had bitten it off; I hadn't.

There wasn't even blood, just an abnormal amount of pain, at least for a tongue. Random shocks of pain pulsed through my mouth, but each pulse was less intense. When I had the strength, I looked up to see my team gathered behind me. Shock written in dark ink across their faces. I turned back around to see that the huge frame I had collided with was on the ground bawling and screaming in pain. Her coaches had fled the sidelines to get to her. The referees surrounded her, evaluating the situation. Her teammates went to take a knee, but mine greeted me with applause and hugs and congratulatory phrases. My head was still swimming, and I was confused by what had happened. Everything was spinning around me and I couldn't recall what had commenced. I just remembered a through ball that the center midfielder sent right between the last two defenders and my pumping legs, pushing me past them, leaving me alone with the ball and the goal, and the goalkeeper who got in my way. And then I remember darkness. Not a slow descent but a tsunami of darkness that washed over me in an instant and carried me away from my world for a few seconds.

I heard a rush of breathy questions: "Are you okay?" "Is anything hurt?" "How do you feel?" I looked at my team surrounding me and plainly stated, "My tongue hurts." They all laughed at my statement. They were amazed at how I took down a girl twice my size and could walk away saying, "My tongue hurts."

The rest of the game was a blur. I sat on the bench for most of it, still unsure if I was in reality. I remembered that we won. I remembered that the girl had badly injured her ankle. I also remembered the referees claiming that I was not the one at fault for a foul. The opposing team's coaches went in a rage at that. The referees argued that I went for the ball and that the goalkeeper

went for me. I don't remember if that was true, but I do remember the sweeping feeling of darkness covering me brought on by the force of another being. My eyes had only been trained on the kaleidoscope of black and white rolling forward with me. Only in my peripherals did I see the hurricane of red hair coming closer.

The only solid feeling I felt, besides the pain in my tongue, was a feeling of being comfortable with my team. They all talked to me excitedly and kept putting their arms around me. They laughed at the girl, the one I had caused pain. They praised me for taking her down. Looking back, I now feel as if I had stooped to their level. I never targeted the goalkeeper, but I injured her, much like how I was injured internally. I didn't realize the irony of this until years later, well, actually by writing this story.

As we left the stadium at the end of the match, the entire team surrounded me as we walked to our cars. Everyone was excitedly chatting. I kept checking to see if my tongue had fallen off. It hadn't, but I didn't believe myself.

I got in my mom's car and hid my head in the shadows, seeking my original company. It was there. I felt dark's warm embrace. It didn't judge me of my actions, it just loved me as I was with no conditions or prejudices or anything negative.

But, if I want to be truly honest, I wasn't lurking in the shadows. I was basking in the cold limelight. I had talked to my teammates excitedly. I told my entire family about how I took down a girl twice my size. I let the exaggerations build upon excitement.

Now, I never intended to hurt her, but the feeling of being accepted, *finally* accepted by my team felt incredible. I felt like royalty when they put their arms around me. I felt like I was on the inside, not on the outside. I soaked up the spotlight, happy there, for a moment. Happy that I was getting what I had always wanted, although I didn't always realize that I desperately

wanted that. I forsook my friend, my TRUE friend, who had let me come and cry and hide from the world. I left the dark and I didn't even recognize it. It wasn't until recently that I was shown the irony of this. I had hurt a girl to get accepted; to be accepted by girls who hurt me emotionally and I didn't even recognize that until nine years later. It's like that cringy feeling when you remember an awkward moment that happened a few hours ago or few days ago. That's how I feel now. But it wasn't an awkward moment; I had hurt someone physically.

I'm not fourteen anymore. My thoughts and feelings now won't change my actions then.

I'll just sweep the cringe under darkness's encompassing, loving rug and won't look at the tiny quandary mess I made, added to the many other mistakes and wrongs I've made. You live and learn, right? Some might even say that is the purpose of life, or the purpose of why we are birthed into existence. Out of the dark womb and into the harsh light of life.

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Dark is the earliest memory. We are birthed into this life, leaving the dark, but it follows desperately, longingly. The dark is more memorable than the light. It hides what we need hidden from the world, providing contrast to the things we want the light to show the world.