Student Sample

ENG 271

3 May 2019

Patrick, the session leader, sat in the center of the Literal Heart of Jesus, guitar perched on this chair. Three chairs were arranged in front of him, only two occupied. One sat a girl, Hazel, whose appearance seemed much younger than she actually was. It was the short hair and poor health, all results of her cancer, that gave her this effect. Still, she was much too young to be where she was right then.

She and Patrick were well acquainted. In fact, it was Patrick who recommended this new group session to Hazel’s mother, who then made the executive decision that she would be attending. Hazel sat uncomfortably in her chair, reminding her of the same plastic chairs she spent her middle and elementary school days in, before all of this had happened to her. Suddenly she was nostalgic for those times, when everything was simple and she never knew pain or loss like she did now. But no, she wouldn’t trade it for anything. Not if it meant she wouldn’t have known him. Stirring in her seat, Hazel kept her gaze to the ground, avoiding Patrick’s overly enthusiastic smiling, his attempt at making her feel welcomed and noticed. All she wanted was to disappear at that moment.

Patrick turned his focus to the other chair, where a girl neither of them recognized at, dressed in bright, patterned clothes. Her name tag read *Fabiola.* She was looking around the church basement, at the crosses and other symbols of Christianity and suddenly yearned for her altar back home, with its familiar items and feel of safety.

Five minutes had passed since the session was supposed to begin and the third seat was almost empty. “Why don’t we go ahead and get started? I’m sure our other guest is just running a little behind,” Patrick said, noticing the girls’ clear desire to get things going.

He went on to share his story, of everyone he lost from the Support Group he ran for cancer patients, referring to them as each like a member of his family. Hazel was just glad he didn’t mention his ball-lessness, something she had heard about far too many times for her liking.

“Hazel, are you with us?” Patrick said, and Hazel almost jumped. “I asked if you’d like to start the introductions.”

She got up awkwardly, adjusting her tubes. “I’m Hazel. I’m here because my boyfriend, Augustus Waters, died, as we all will one day. He just went sooner than most because he had the sad misfortune of having a touch of cancer.”

Fabiola gave her a funny look. Patrick wasn’t fazed, knowing this was Hazel. “And how are you doing?” He asked.

“I could be worse.” She sat then, not wanting to say anymore. It was more difficult than she thought it would be to say these things out loud.

Fabiola was asked to go. “I am Fabiola Toussaint. Kasim, my boyfriend, was killed. I am praying to Papa Legba every day for his soul.”

It was Hazel’s turn to look confused now. It was replaced by boredom soon enough as Patrick went on about how grateful he was that everyone could make it today, even though not everyone had, and continued on with his attempt at making them feel better. She wondered for a second if he was even certified to give grief counseling. She shrugged it off.

Junior entered the basement in a haste, only fifteen minutes late. For a thirty minute session. He had been unable to get a ride to the support group. His mother was locked up in her room, sick with grief, and his father was off somewhere on a drinking binge. He sat down awkwardly as everyone’s eyes were trained on him.

“You must be Arnold. We’re so glad you could make it!” Patrick said in an overly cheerful voice. “Why don’t you introduce yourself to the group?”

Junior stood self-consciously. “I’m Junior, er, I mean Arnold Spirit. I’m here because I lost my grandmother and my sister. To name a few.”

Hazel fiddled with her oxygen tank. What did he mean, to name a few? This kid, Junior, or Arnold, looked no more than fourteen. How many people had he lost? Of course, Hazel had lost many too, but she was never close with any of them. It was just a condition that came with having cancer.

As Patrick went on with his speech about finding hope and accepting grief, Fabiola took a look at this new arrival. She had never seen anyone that looked like him before. She wondered how he had lost his grandmother and sister. She couldn’t imagine losing her cousins, and they were almost like sisters to her.

This was one of the last places Junior wanted to be. He had to do something, though, to get over all of the loss he was going through. It was unfair, all of it. No one at Reardan would have to do something like this. It was just a part of being an Indian. He didn’t choose this life and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Let’s talk about you guys now,” Patrick said and Hazel had to keep herself from grunting. She did *not* come here to talk. She had begun to make her plan for escape when Patrick looked at her directly. “Tell us, Hazel, what have you been doing to cope with the loss of your special friend?”

“Well, I guess I’m trying to live that life that Augustus would have wanted to live and would have wanted me to live. Trying to notice everything and notice things and be present. That’s about all I’ve got,” Hazel told them all, not bothering to stand.

“I am trying to be strong and brave. I am trusting in Papa Legba to make everything right, for me and for my family. I must trust that the *lwas* have a plan.” Fabiola’s spoke.

All eyes turned to Junior. Again he felt the heat of all attention focused on him. He hated it.

“I’m just holding on to hope, pushing forward.” Junior didn’t know what else to say. “It’s all I can do. Things just happen and you have to keep hoping they’ll get better.”

“I think those are all mighty fine.” Patrick was cheery while trying to look sympathetic. “And how about your fears? What is holding you back in the situations you’re all in?”

Junior knew how to answer this one. He had a lot of fears. He found himself speaking up willingly this time. “So many Indians have died on my reservation. And all because of that fricking booze. They give up on life and turn to alcohol to forget. Only they end up dying in some awful, stupid way.” As Junior spoke, a fire flared up inside of him, angry at everything he had to go through. “My sister died in a fire because she was too drunk to wake up, to even feel the pain of being burned alive. My grandmother was killed by a drunk driver. It’s all the same fate in different forms. My fear is that I’m destined for the same fate, and everyone I care about.”

Hazel couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. Although she had never experienced what he was describing to them, she knew what it was like to be trapped by an inescapable fate. “I often feel like I’m a grenade, and I’m afraid that one day I’m going to go off and obliterate everyone in my path. I don’t want to hurt the people I care about, to have them care about me even though I’m a ticking bomb, ready to explode at any moment.”

“I fear I will never see my mother again and that it was a bad idea to come to America. None of this would have happened if we had just stayed in Haiti.” Fabiola was looking at the ground. She had never voiced those thoughts to anyone.

Patrick looked at each of them. He went on to talk about fear and how it keeps a hold on you. The three of them couldn’t focus, though. They didn’t see how any of this was helping. All Patrick was successful at was bringing up some of their worst feelings. How was this going to help them to move on.

“Something I think is important for everyone who is going through a loss to know is that pain and fear are part of grief, and it is completely normal. With that, it is okay to feel overwhelmed. And it is okay to cry or do what you have to to let that pain out,” Patrick was saying.

Junior had had his fair share of crying. That was all he did anymore. What kind of advice was this? He shouldn’t be telling us to cry, Junior thought, he should be telling us to toughen up and get over it. That’s what they did on the reservation.

Patrick’s last words stuck with Fabiola. She *had* been feeling overwhelmed and hadn’t even noticed. Everything had just happened so fast, with the party and Kasim being shot and Dray. She hadn’t taken a minute to register what had happened that night. It suddenly came flooding back to her like a tsunami.

“Just take a minute to think of other difficult times in your life and the pain they caused you,” Patrick told them all.

Hazel was listening now. She new difficult times. It was every day for her. She thought back to when she almost died, when she was diagnosed, when she almost died again, and again. But none of that could compare to losing Augustus. What was Patrick trying to do, making them think about everything bad in their lives?

The day of the earthquake was fresh in Fabiola’s mind, the move to America and adjusting to this completely different world.

Junior couldn’t think of a time when his life wasn’t difficult. Most of the events were related to someone’s abuse of alcohol. Then he remembered the day his dog had to be put down. Shoot, he thought, he should’ve added Oscar to the list along with his sister and grandmother. That one may have been one of the most difficult things he ever encountered.

“Now think to yourself how you overcome those difficulties. And I know you did because you’re all here with me today,” Patrick added in.

He was right, they had all survived their hardships. Hazel was still going, she made it through all of those awful nights in the hospital. Fabiola adjusted to her new life. Junior got through the struggles of his poverty and environment. They had survived then, and they can survive this.

Just then, Patrick’s phone buzzed in the pocket of his sweater. He picked up and a look of panic crossed his face as he listened to the other end. He got up and began to gather his things before he had even hung up. “I am so sorry, fellows, but I’m going to have to end this session early.” He left them, awkwardly fast-walking up to the stairs and hopping up them.

That was it? He was going to leave them there just like that? They didn’t even get to find out how to connect everything he had been telling them. What a waste of time, Junior thought.

The three of them sat quietly for a while, avoiding eye contact. None of them could leave until their rides got there, who were all planning on showing up when the session was actually supposed to end. Except Junior. He didn’t know how he was going to get back.

“Well, that was pointless,” Junior said, voicing what they were all thinking. He dug at the ground with his worn out shoes. “If he was a counselor back on the rez, the other guys would have fought him for that.”

Fabiola stood then, a strange look crossing her face. Junior’s words had made her realize something. “All it’s ever been is fighting for me. Fighting off boys and girls and men. Fighting for myself, for my mother, for my cousins and aunt. And now it’s fighting this pain in my chest that won’t go away. Fighting, fighting, fighting. When will it stop?” Her heart was beating fast now, her voice coming out loud and uneven. She hadn’t meant to burst out like that, her mouth decided to speak the words of her heart. But her words were unbreakable.

Junior wanted to cry. Never had he heard someone express what he was feeling like that. Sure, all Indians fought, but they never questioned it. They never thought why. He didn’t know what to do, he was feeling all kinds of things. She was right, all it was was fighting, fighting, fighting. He had to fight every day, to protect himself from being picked on, to protect his entire race whenever some white guy took a racist jab at him. Fighting for a future away from the reservation. Worst of all, he had to fight every loss he ever experienced from crushing him whole. And he knew it was a fight he could never win.

Hazel couldn’t look at the other two because she knew Fabiola’s words too well. Her life was a fight; of survival, of managing to just exist every day. She fought for her life, and for Gus, and for their love. And she had to fight to keep everything he gave her from being ripped away, falling into the oblivion with him. She remembered his words, though, *You don’t get to choose if you get hurt in this world.* She suddenly worked up the courage to speak then. “Fighting is a side effect of pain. Pain is a side effect of life. But what is the point of fighting if pain is inevitable? We have all suffered so much loss. Nothing we can do can make the pain any less real, make our losses hurt any less. So why fight it?”

Stop fighting? The thought had never occurred to them before. Junior had spent his whole life fighting, as well as Fabiola. Could they even manage to stop? Would they know how? Life was nothing but a fight to each and every one of them.

A thought occurred to Junior just then. Just because he had always fought didn’t mean he had to continue. It was all he knew, but then again, he gave up a lot of things that were all he knew. Leaving the reservation, going to a new school, it was all different, so why couldn’t he change his mindset, his way of life? He didn’t know what would happen, but he had to try. He couldn’t keep fighting the drunks forever. There was nothing he could do, it was their choice to make. He thought of how much easier it would be to just stop fighting and accept what came at him.

Fabiola, too, decided she was done with fighting. There was nothing she could do about Kasim’s death. And wasn’t it fighting that wound him up with a bullet through him in the first place? She was trying to fight for her cousins, to fight Dray, and what good did that do her or any of them? Life happens and death happens and you just have to move on or else it will rip you apart until there is nothing left. She was like a rock, Fabiola reminded herself. No, she was a mountain. She was tough and could brave anything. Could stand above anything. No storm, no matter how big, could break her. She would keep holding on and standing tall.

Hazel wouldn’t fight, all that did was make that pain worse. She would live. Because, yes, pain was inevitable. Suffering was inevitable. People would die, battles would be lost, sickness would damage some and take others for good. And there was no point in fighting what she couldn’t control because all it would do would make it that much more unbearable. So she would let the pain come over her but not let it control her. She would let the happiness and the excitement and the ordinary come to. She wouldn’t waste her life on fighting something that was out of her reach. Hazel would live and notice and be present. And Fabiola would stand tall as a mountain. And Junior would hope and forgive.