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2024

ENG 100: Nona

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, Leo, "ENG 100: Nona" (2024). *English 100-200-300 Conference*. Paper 25.

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Nona

Leo Lewis

You keep asking why your work is not enough and I don't know how to answer that, because it is enough to exist in the world and marvel at it... You're allowed to just live.

--Becky Chambers, "A Psalm for the Wild Built"

He held his cupped hands out to me, like we were made of glass and would shatter if he spoke too loudly. "She's beautiful," he softly whispered. The tiny snake slowly turned to slither from my palms into his. "Yeah, she sure seems to think so" I said back, lowering my voice to match his. The second her nose brushed his fingertips, she recoiled and with a hiss launched herself at him in a desperate attempt to tear into flesh, to make him bleed, to make him hurt.

Nona was a sneaky little scoundrel with a love for coffee. She made a beeline for any cup within smelling distance. Now, a snake's brain is too primitive to truly feel love or affection, at least not like we do. Every living thing knows what's good and bad for them. In my opinion, there's only two conditions that need to be met for affection: The aforementioned ability to recognize good from bad and memory. So, to me, she really did love the smell of coffee, and I think she felt the same about me. Of course, she didn't have to give a shit about me, I would always adore her. Caring for a pathetic helpless little troublemaker meant I had to take better care of myself. In a way, she protected me, both from myself and later, from him.

Before she slithered into my life, I was struggling. Getting out of bed felt impossible, I barely ate, and I got up to some real stupid shit in my free time. I didn't rely on my kind and loving parents cause, you know, who would do that? Instead, I picked the worst possible option: my very best friend, Sedge. Our school was one of those fucked up, K through 12, kinda places, so he and I had grown up together. We knew almost everything about each other, including our struggles. At times it felt as though no one was there for us, so we went to each other. He wasn't as good as Nona was, everyone pales in comparison to her, but he could make me feel a little better. He and I talked about our girlfriends, school, parents, everything. He meant the world to me. Nona was never a violent creature, surly and stubborn sure, but never violent. Her pacifism was a feat among snakes. She met many people, fearful 5-year-olds and incompetent adults included, but she never bit anyone. Up until that day the worst she ever did was impersonate a rattlesnake. But on that day, she hissed and struck for the first and only time.

In the weeks building up to the incident, my life had crumbled like an old brick wall. Memories buried me in fear and sorrow. Sedge had grown weary of his old girlfriend and turned his sights toward me. He used our history as a weapon, turning all that he had done for me into a blade pressed against my throat. But what could I do about it? He meant the world to me, and I was a toy to him. So, what if I suffer? I should be happy to help him. I should be happy his arms and legs aren't striped like mine. But I wasn't happy, I was faced with the worst pain I've ever felt on a weekly basis, and coming from me that means a lot. Nona knew this. The trembling in my hands as I held her must have felt like earthquakes, of course she bit him. If snakes can smell fear, then she could definitely sense it from me. Whether she knew it or not, she had saved me. He was a coward, a little snake like her physically couldn't cause him harm, but it drove him off all the same.

I was finally set free, and the first thing I did was give Nona my favorite geode and a new tree branch. She already lived her life in comfort, but I felt as though I had to do something nice for her. For the remainder of her life, she was treated as royalty. But my time with Nona was abruptly cut short. For the promise of free college, I gave my life back home up. For a brief time, I had considered trying to bring her with me. I just couldn't find a way to make it work, pets aren't allowed at Gatton. If only I had gotten her registered as an ESA, she'd still be with me, but that's not what happened. I put her under the care of one of my beloved teachers and, telling myself it would just be two short years, I set off for Gatton. At the end of my first semester here I got a text. Of course, people call and text me all the time. I'm like so super popular after all. But the second I saw who sent it my heart sunk deep into my gut. On Wednesday, October 25th at 9:04 AM my teacher found Nona dead. I burst into tears, my hand frozen on the door I had pushed open as I left class. I quickly scrambled down the hall, up the stairs and to the right; I would rather be lost than let those Gatton nerds see me cry.

I wasn't just running from them; I was running from my thoughts. But you can't run from your own mind, it always outpaces you. And so they did. I left her. I abandoned her after all that. After all she had done for me, I let her die. My thoughts were irrational, but they stung like the truth. My phone buzzed with another text. The poor teacher was deeply apologetic. He didn't know what happened. What the fuck. She was fine. She was just fine. She was supposed to be fine. She had to be fine. No way did she just die. I can't just accept that. Something had to have happened. She wasn't sick or hurt or, or anything at all. My paranoia screamed foul play. My racing thoughts screeched to a halt. If only I could figure out who did it, I could fix things. It couldn't have been my biology teacher. He cared about her too. If it wasn't the teacher, then it had to have been those cretins they call students. With that I could begin plotting my retaliatio-No, nothing I do is gonna fix this. She's gone. That's it, end of story. Blaming the students was a huge leap to begin with, did I really want to keep fighting with them? In truth, I was hated there. I spent my childhood going tit for tat with them and now I have a chance to end it. But at the same time, I want my old life back, even the bad parts. Falling back into my old accusing, paranoid habits was comforting in a way. It felt like I was back home, watching poorly written 80's movies with Sedge. It felt like if I walked into my room, Nona would be there waiting for me in her tree branch, with a tired, grumpy look on her face. I miss them both. I know I'll never get them back, but I want them here anyways. And that's okay right? Right? It's okay to miss people, I think, no matter how you lost them, how long they've been gone, or if they were just a little snake who loved coffee. (1293 words)