

# **My Treadmill is an Angel**

**by Léo Remke-Rochard**

The only person I've ever loved is my Grandmother Junia, and my last memory of her living body was formed in the summer. A week before my first year of college, I was standing outside next to the car, ready to get in, and drive away. She had just bid me farewell, and as she oriented herself back towards her house, I took it upon myself to observe. She moved slowly as though her body had been composed of boulders stacked tediously on top of one another. Each step forward left her looking rocked, unbalanced, and increasingly frail. She was wearing her large black dress. When I was a younger boy, the black dress went down to the middle of her calves, but now, the faded grey dress touched the floor.

My Grandmother Junia was an admirable woman. She believed in living life modestly and correctly. With the exception of her wooden brown necklaces which featured hand whittled pendants of Jesus on the cross strung to them, all the clothes in her possession were black and imageless. The house she lived in was small. There were no mirrors there. The toilet, the kitchen and the mattress she slept on were all in a single unseparated room. The house had only three decorations; a photograph of my grandmother visiting her nun friend Abilene taped above the toilet, a portrait of the Virgin Mary I had drawn for her at Sunday school nailed to the wall, and a large wooden cross that stood upright in the center of the room. It towered over her. There was a small wheel attached to the base of the cross. This was because, when she still could, she carried it everywhere she walked. At the grocery store, she parked it outside like an animal that wasn't allowed in. Sometimes, as she teetered alongside the road with it, people would take photographs of her and laugh.

My first opportunity to accompany her to church had to be seized with direct action. My parents, Adriel and Agnes, are upper middle class progressivists who generally believe that globalization is good, but religion is divisive. They decided to not raise my twin sister Birdie and I as Christians. Grandmother Junia knew this. And yet, when she came over to the house, she made it a point to offer to take Birdie and I to church, and bring us under her religious wing. "I could make good children of them if you let me," she'd always say. And after a while, I grew curious. At age 10, I could no longer contain my curiosity. As I was walking Grandmother Junia back out to her cross one evening, we made an arrangement. "I know you're a good boy, Syncere, and when you reach the Kingdom of God, he will reward you," she murmured into my ear, and embraced me.

The plan was perfect. I would scream. I would scream an evil harrowing scream. A scream capable of dislodging my parents' convictions. I would scream in the house. "I want to go to the Kingdom of God," I would scream. I would scream in the day, and I would scream in the night. "You weak, pitiful, and secular parents, why won't you let me pursue God's Kingdom," I would scream. I would scream into Adriel's ears when he was cooking, I would scream into Agnes' when she was reading. "Oh dear lord," I would scream. I didn't know much about God, but what I did I said in a scream. I would scream at Birdie. I would scream at our dog Cornelius. I would scream at Agnes' Kombucha. I would scream the birds in the yard silly. I

would scream at Adriel's electric scooter. I would scream at our innocent mailman. And until Adriel and Agnes agreed to let me accompany Grandmother Junia to church, I wouldn't cease screaming.

"Fucking fine," Adriel said definitively one night, "if this little Jesus freak wants to go church with Junia so bad, then I say we let him. I can't stand this bullshit anymore." Adriel broke into tears, Birdie followed like a domino. Agnes consoled them. And me, I grinned.

My first time at church Grandmother Junia absorbed the pastor's words. I followed her lead. I liked that the church echoed. I liked how the natural light poured in through the windows. Perhaps, the part that surprised me the most was that Grandmother Junia did not seem very well known at the church. It was nearly full. And yet, few people made a conscious effort to acknowledge her. I found this odd considering how big of a part church seemed to play in her life. Regardless, Grandmother Junia was pleased with me, and from that day on, I went to church with her every week I could. After exiting mass, she called me her sweet little angel, and this made me feel warm inside.

For Grandmother Junia and my parents, Birdie's and my education was a point of contention. She wanted Birdie and I to go to a small private school called Saint Mary's. They sent us to a public school called George Washington. She wanted Birdie and I to spend our time after school volunteering for The Good Path, an organization that pairs illiterate children with literate Christian children to help them read and make good choices. It was her nun friend Abilene who started it, and we would be in good hands, she emphasized. The connection meant a lot to Grandmother Junia, and yet Adriel and Agnes decided to enroll us in soccer instead. "Soccer," Adriel would say, "is a universal language that players from all around the world can speak with their feet."

Birdie was quickly drawn to the sport. She was good. It empowered her. The schedule, the workouts, the sun she got, the matching uniforms, the attention, the commitment, and the winning made her seem so beautiful, and so perfect. She played all throughout high school. The girl's team made it to state three times, and without any convincing, her teammates swore that it was due to her. She was a striker. The longer she stayed with the game, the more engrossing her beauty grew to be. With the exception of Grandmother Junia, it seemed that everyone was more attracted to her than to me. The family dog Cornelius, our teachers, the college recruiters, the kids at school, our neighbors, her teammates, my teammates, our parents, our piano teacher Mr. Simpson, and our cousins from the east coast all seemed to like her more than me.

I was not drawn to the sport. I was poor at it. I played until Agnes agreed to let me stop. Adriel followed her lead. From 2nd to 9th grade, I played alongside the same teammates, and they did not like me. I was skinny. They were slim, but muscular, and they hailed primarily from homes where their pale mothers had made them the sole center of attention. At our games, their mothers and girlfriends came out to encourage them with painted faces, and supportive signs that said things like "#12 on the field, #1 in my heart" and "We love you Brady!" They were nerds, soccer nerds. I was, unwillingly, an outcast. I think they thought I weighed the team down, but I don't exactly remember when they decided to feel this way.

When we lost, they punished me. They would seize my water bottle, seal an inescapable circle around me, and toss it back and forth to one another as I tried to repossess it. I looked like a toy. I was also so thirsty. On an occasion where the weather was particularly hot, and where

my teammates kept me chasing for a particularly long time, I got dehydrated and suffered a heat stroke. Before I lost consciousness, I vomited on myself as half the team anxiously tried to pour water into my mouth, and the other half filmed videos for their Snapchat stories. Eventually, I ascended the ambulance. There were two paramedic men. They were blonde, young, and attractive. One held my hand, and the other held me upright as I inched toward the stretcher. Their touch felt good. When I laid down, none of my teammates' facial expressions struck me as all that guilty. The doors closed. My vision went white.

When I woke up in the hospital, there was a moment where I couldn't remember my parents or the street we lived on. The medical people asked me the president's name. I couldn't remember where I had passed out, nor could I remember what I was doing at the time. The experience was pleasant, but after about an hour my senses came back to me.

When my teammates won, it was worse; they beat me viscerally. When the difference in score was lesser, they beat me lightly. When the difference in score was greater, they became most certain of my uselessness on the team and they beat me hardest. On the field, there was a certain groove they could get into sometimes. A certain ethereal state during which all of their playing styles became intertwined and elegantly succinct. It seemed to emerge like a rising wind. The more their dominance echoed on the scoreboard, the more difficult breaking them away from their thunderous primal state proved to be.

On the night our team blew out Fairview South 15-0, they beat me unreasonably. As I saw the pixels rearrange from a 9 to a 10 on the scoreboard, my teammates' faces melted into ecstasy. My anxiety overcame me with an aggression I hadn't experienced before. All I could do was wait. The buzzer sounded, and my teammates rushed over to shake the hands of our opponents. Once they had shown sportsmanship, they came after me.

I fell to the ground without thought, and my knees shriveled into submission. At first, their beating felt procedural. They beat me as soccer players do, they kicked me on the ground with their feet, in their "universal language". But then something unusual happened. Brady, our goalie, sat down on my chest and wrapped his thick gloved hands around my neck. As he descended into this position, he did not look into my eyes. His eyes were locked on the faces of my other teammates as they collectively laughed. It was abrupt, like I wasn't even there. Under the floodlights, their angular jaw lines and piss yellow jerseys beamed. I stopped feeling in their world, and began to feel somewhere else. Brady was strangling me. I feared that Fairview South had lost by too much, and absorbed the prospect that Brady, and the rest of my team, in their triumphant disassociated ecstasy, might let me die.

It was by the grace of our classmate Al-Ghazali that they didn't. What I appreciated most about Al-Ghazali was his unabating, but gentle giggle. With it, it seemed that he could disarm people, and reinject innocence into situations where it had been previously lost. He was selflessly devoted to our school spirit. He was on the yearbook committee, he did student government, but most importantly, he volunteered to animate our high school mascot for as many events as he could. George was a bright yellow Giraffe with majestic brown blotches who stood upright, wore black athletic shorts, and had white tennis shoes instead of cloven hooves. As for the costume, the neck extended far upwards of Al-Ghazali's head, and thus the mesh for his eyes and breathing were located at the base of the neck. Al-Ghazali's costume was tiring. Over time, the bright yellows and majestic browns had become sterile and discolored. It reeked of sweat, and

the neck was disproportionately heavy which caused it to lean forward. George looked down, limp, and checked out.

Giggling through the mesh, Al-Ghazali hustled over to the circle. The foam costume inhibited his speed. After the big win, he wanted to congratulate the team. Usually, my teammates paid him no attention when he made such gestures. But this night was different. When they spotted him out of the corner of their eye, they lifted off of me and began to chant "George, George, George." They charged him, swept him off of his feet in a brisk motion, and carried the giggling Giraffe out of the field victoriously. I was left alone.

Transfixed by the pain I felt all over, I laid still under the floodlights. As I lost focus on my surroundings, small glittery specs decorated my perception. My vision went white, and I listened. I could hear the sounds of cars on the freeway a block away from the field. They sounded undisturbed and motionless, like static. At some point my mother came to fetch me. My vision was restored. She had her phone in hand. She was texting. The floodlights turned off.

"Why are you lying on the ground?" she said, not bothering to look at me.

"Brady strangled me, Agnes," I said, "I'm hurt."

"Hurt," she said with intrigue. "Why did Brady strangle you?"

"Brady strangled me, Agnes," I said "because our team kicked Fairview South's ass tonight." She continued to text. "Isn't that messed up," I added.

"Damn right you guys did, honey," she said. There was a pause.

"Oh you boys, and your roughhousing," she smiled. Her phone screen cast a bright light, which caused her pristinely white teeth to glow. "Come on honey, get up, let's go," she said. She tucked her phone into her back pocket. I complied, and stood up. With the exception of the sound Agnes' key fob made as she unlocked the doors, the walk towards the car was silent. And as I stepped into the light of the parking lot, Agnes' mood shifted. Her eyes expanded in the way they did when she learned that Birdie lost her virginity. She seemed to fear me.

"Jesus, Syncere, what the hell are those bruises on your neck?"

"I told you, Agnes. Brady strangled me," I said. She said nothing. "I want to live with Grandmother Junia from now on," I added, receding into the passenger seat of her car.

"Okay." She shut the driver side door closed.

Living with Grandmother Junia was an adjustment I enjoyed making. I abandoned my cell phone. I stopped playing soccer, and studied the grand assortment of Christian theological texts in Grandmother Junia's collection. Of them all it was the rules, sets of precise guidelines written for monastic life, which spoke to me most. The sweet and salty foods that made me feel like a glutton were gone. Monday through Thursday, Grandmother Junia and I ate bread, Fridays we had fish, and over the weekend we ate steamed vegetables. When my schoolwork required the computer, I went to the library. Grandmother Junia had running water, but she insisted that we wash up in buckets outside. Grandmother Junia had electricity, but she insisted that we use candlelight. The mattress I slept on laid parallel to hers. Every night before bed, we prayed together. When it came time to sleep, she would blow out the candle and say, in an enlightened tone, "Syncere, my sweet little angel, I will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God when I die. And once I enter, I hope you will follow me, Syncere. Because it is in the Kingdom of God that your pure soul belongs. Goodnight."

Everyday at 2 o'clock, when school ended, Grandmother Junia was outside waiting for me. In her black dress, she stood patiently alongside her wooden cross as high schoolers poured out from the exits. In the crowd, she was never hard to find, and standing there, she made me feel safe. When we encountered my former teammates, she'd discreetly position herself in front of me. They didn't notice. On our walks, the exchanges were rich and meaningful. We recited passages from the Bible, we discussed the intricacies of Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica, we gushed at the thought of Saint Benedictine's Rule, and we evaluated the lack of Christianity that seemed to engulf the world around us.

The last one of these walks that I remember happened my senior year of high school. I remember it vividly because it was the first time that Grandmother Junia could no longer bear her cross the way she had. When I walked out from school, she was not proudly propped up alongside it. She was flustered. The wrinkles in her face made her look confused in a way they hadn't before. She asked a group of boys from my high school if any of them were Syncere. They were of a bigger build than I was, buff even. They gave her a patronizing look. Anxiously, I went to fetch her before they could respond. Her cross laid faced down on the ground. I asked her if she wanted me to wheel her cross for her. "Yes, my angel, I do," she said. I noticed a hunch forming in her figure. I thought of our school's dilapidated George the Giraffe costume, and how the neck drooped forward. Grandmother Junia, the mascot that mattered most, now looked down, limp and checked out.

Before going to college, Grandmother Junia had carefully sculpted me into a fine, faithful and aware young man. But once I got there, it did not take long for her tedious work to be undone. The first thing I noticed was a poster board entitled "self-care is community care." The RA put it up. It listed activities you could do to make yourself feel better. Praying didn't figure, reading didn't either.

Everyone in my dorm washed up in indoor showers, and used electricity to illuminate their surroundings. They ordered pizza and chicken wings constantly. Lacklusterly deconstructed pizza boxes formed mountains over the trash bins. Crumbs and bird bones eroded from the top. And as Charity, the severely asthmatic woman who worked as our housekeeper, bent down to her knees to guide it all into the dust pan, they walked right past her, never bothering to cock their heads away from their phones, or unplug an earbud to reckon with the sad sound of her breath. Listening to music about extreme luxury, and sexual acts was common practice for these vain cretins. Watching violence on the lounge tv was too.

One time Gunner, whose room neighbored mine, invited me to watch UFC with his friends. To be safe, I asked him if he had ever played soccer. He said no. I obliged. I handled the first fight fine. The men threw blows at each other and bled. But during the second, I cried as they piled to the ground, and one began to put the other in a choke hold. Gunner's friends noticed. They called me a pussy. I left. I was being disoriented again. Each day I spent away from Grandmother Junia, the distance between myself and my devotion to God widened. He was losing his way with me.

My more dysfunctional attitudes towards food and my body concretized. I didn't go to the cafeteria because there were mirrors, I thought I looked round, and no one let me sit with them. I repulsed myself, which made me hungrier. And so during the night, when none of my idle peers provided me with an invitation to anything, I would camp out next to the row of

vending machines in my dormitory's entrance area, and indulge in the wide selection of sweet, and salty foods. I filled my arms with as many snacks as I could, walked over to the singular table that the school put there to justify calling the room a "dining space", sat down, and devoured them. When I finished the batch, I climbed out of my seat and floated back towards the machines like a lost child. Physically, I felt hollow, wired, and subjugated to the machine. "Under Saint Benedictine's Rule the implementation of this machine would never be allowed," I once muttered to myself in the dimly lit entrance.

Just like my idle peers, I carried a cellphone in my pocket. I no longer devoured sacred texts and theology books. And during the overwhelmingly intimate moments during which I could make no sense of what God intended for me, I used it to watch free and unlimited pornography on the internet. Just like my idle peers, I absorbed information without bounds. I spiraled around on YouTube. I absorbed the words of my professors without establishing internal boundaries. Just like my idle peers, I idolized attractive Instagram influencers. I observed their workout plans and intricate diets not as a code to live by, but as visual entertainment. All I could do was scroll. Time was flying by, but it was flying much too close to the ground.

About six weeks into college, I made two realizations. 1) Grandmother Junia had died. Agnes informed me over text. I didn't respond. I wanted Grandmother Junia's voice. 2) I was utterly alone, and my sociability seemed to do nothing but decline. The RA board said to run, so I did.

The first time I went to the gym there was no one else there. With the exception of the mirrors, it was perfect, but I didn't look at those. The only audible sound was a hum that came from the ice machine out in the exterior hallway. There were five treadmills in the gym. I examined three of them before settling for the one in the corner. It seemed to be a slightly newer model than the others. My palms rested effortlessly on the handles. It was sleek, and the pixel display periodically featured an animation that the others didn't. A haze of pixels fluttering downwards as though gravel were being poured out from a bucket, or as though everything was crumbling.

The treadmill's controls made a beeping sound. As a user, I could increase and decrease both the speed and the elevation. My heart rate and my weight could be measured too. At first, I set the speed on low and walked. Beep. This was easy. Beep. Quickly, I felt ready to up the speed. Beep. I began to jog lightly. This became comfortable, and I ran. Beep, beep, beep. Instinctively, my body began to gasp for breath. It felt most natural. I increased the speed more. Beep, beep, beep, beep. As I synchronized with the machine, I imagined a monkey to man evolution visual in which the figures were representations of me at different speeds. I felt empowered.

After a mile, something strange began to happen. I heard an enlightened voice that was not my own. I closed my eyes. It was Grandmother Junia's. "Sincere," the voice said, "oh my sweet angel, I am in the Kingdom of God now, and it's time for you to join me, Sincere, it is time for you to join me in the Kingdom of God, Sincere. It is in the Kingdom of God that your soul belongs, Sincere." The repeating voice spoke to me like this for a while, and when it stopped I opened my eyes. I looked at the dashboard, I had run three miles. I was exhausted. "I'll be doing this again," I said to myself.

When I walked into the gym the next day, I was eager. This time, a girl populated the front desk. She was looking down as she thumbed through a feed on her phone. I thought she looked shy. A tall transparent plastic panel on the desk divided the greeters from the greeted. And behind it, she did not notice my presence, so I felt the need to announce it.

"Hello," I said. "Should I scan my ID?"

"Hi," she said. "No, are you here for baseball?"

"No, I'm just here to run," I said. To my left, my treadmill was still elegantly tucked into the corner. There were now stains on the dashboard from where my droplets of sweat had landed. The suffocating fluorescent lights shined down on it and the machine seemed to gleam like an angel. I wanted to be on top of it, running, now.

"Sorry," she said with some uncertainty. "The gym is reserved for baseball right now, but you can book an appointment for a time after 7."

"An appointment after 7? I'll have you know my treadmill is an angel, he's my angel, my guardian. Just let me be here with him. I was here with him yesterday, it was exquisite. He's all I want. That sweet treadmill... In the corner, is my everything," I said. In my head, I had imagined I was shouting these things assertively. But then the girl at the front desk began to speak to me again, and it felt as though she had not heard a single word I had just said.

"Do you want help making an appointment for after baseball is done?" she asked softly. I thought about her proposal and I scanned the large room. There was only one other person in the gym. It was Gunner. He was "baseball?" The exercise he was doing sounded foul. In each hand, he was carrying a large weight. And with them, he slowly lunged around a square path that he had designated for himself in the corner that opposed my treadmill. The path was about 10 feet by 10 feet. Each time he descended for a lunge, he shouted in anguish. His skin was white when I watched UFC with him. But now it was pink and fleshy like an alien. He looked lonely and pious and strong.

I decided that he did not need the gym to himself more than I needed to be with Grandmother Junia, and told the girl at the front desk "no."

A silence passed. We stared at each other. She struggled with what to say.

"Can I please just use the treadmill over there? I promise to leave baseball alone. There's enough space for both of us. Only us three have to know. I was here yesterday at this very same time and there was no issue," I said to help her out.

"I'm sorry, it's my first day here and I really don't want to get in trouble. I am going to have to ask you to leave," she said.

I continued to stand there.

"Well, I can try to ask my boss and see if it's okay," she kindly offered.

"That'd be great," I said.

She began to type out a text. I gravitated towards the treadmill as though it were a magnet. I rested my hands on the side bars to feel my sweet angel. I touched the start button on the dashboard, a simple pixel art animation hovered across the screen which wrote out "Welcome".

I said hello back, and set his speed to 7.5 miles per hour. Beep, beep, beep, beep... And as I did so, I felt sturdy again. I began to sweat. I heard Grandmother Junia's voice reach from a

distance. I could not discern the words though. I closed my eyes to get closer. But then I felt the contour of the annoying front desk girl emerge beside me. I opened my eyes.

"Yup, you need to leave," she said.

I stormed out. "Yup, you need to leave. Yup, that's right you need to leave. You need to leave because everyone hates you, and no one wants you here," I repeated out loud to myself. The words sunk to the center of my head like an anchor. And as I repeated them, they made me feel worse. I was going to join Grandmother Junia. For real this time. And it would be at that small little annoying girl from the front desk's expense.

The plan was perfect. I would make her scream. I scheduled an appointment online for 7 p.m. the next day, just as she had asked. Later the same evening, I snuck into the gym, and I brought a rope with me. When I got to the gym, I sat at the edge of my angel, and looked up how to tie a noose on my cell phone. I scrolled past the automated suicide prevention lifeline banner to a site that had answers. I followed WikiHow's instructions diligently. When I was done, I climbed my angel. The gym had a drop ceiling. I pushed out the tile above him, fastened my noose up in the ceiling space, and tucked the tile back into position.

The next day, I came at 7 p.m. on the dot. I scanned my ID, and stared down the annoying girl at the desk. She didn't seem to register that it was me. Thank God she was working that night. Baseball was just finishing up their workouts for the day. This time, there were multiple players. They were nerds, baseball nerds, and they were chatting about something insignificant. I, willingly, had a bigger statement to make that night. I floated towards my angel, set his speed to 7.5, and we ran together. I heard the voice of Grandmother Junia. "Join me in the Kingdom of God, Syncere, join me now," it said.

While baseball and the annoying girl at the front desk had their heads turned away from me and my angel, I climbed his sidebars. My shoes dirtied them, and for that I apologized. "Sorry, angel," I murmured. I popped out the ceiling tile, and peeked my head through the noose. I thought of George's limp neck, and I jumped. My shoe toes teetered over the conveyor belt as my breath escaped me. In my brain, Charity appeared on her knees. I felt thin.

The annoying girl screamed. Her face flushed red like a tomato. Baseball formed a semi circle around my body and filmed videos for their Snapchat. My vision went black. I began to feel somewhere else. Then I saw Grandmother Junia. This time, her dress was white. "Welcome to the Kingdom of God," she said as she embraced me.