“Red and Green”
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Red and Green

I see my sister, smile wider than ever before, overjoyed with the mug I hand-painted for her. My brother is cozying up next to the fire in his flannel pajamas as he clutches the stuffed animal he’s had since the night he was born. My parents sip their strong, black coffee and hum carols as their children romp around in the shredded red and green wrapping paper strewn across the living room floor. My grandmother grins and closes her eyes, reminiscing in all her Christmases past. This is joy. This joy, however, is not merely an annual occurrence. I believe in perpetual celebration – celebration in the mundane, winter Mondays when I can barely roll out of bed, and celebration in the tragic, heart-wrenching Thursdays when shockwaves reverberate through the nation. I believe in ceaseless celebration.

In elementary school, I had a teacher who would announce the national holiday every morning. Most kids disregarded him; they saw him as a decrepit man struggling to be young. I, however, thought it was an alluring concept, but as soon as I graduated his class, I forgot all he taught me; I had more noteworthy accomplishments to complete. Middle school presented itself with challenges I was utterly unprepared for. The pressure to succeed grew inversely to the number of friends I had. My thoughts were consumed with the idea that I was not doing enough – enough to be successful, enough to be accepted, enough to be loved. By eighth grade, I was done. I didn’t see a reason to live, let alone celebrate. The thoughts of red and green no longer meant Christmas to me; they indicated self-inflicted cuts and bruises. These marks were my only reality for the years to come.

I knew something had to change. If not, I would succumb to the inviting allure of the bottles of cleaner on the bathroom counter or the constant calling of the medicine cabinet above. I flashed back to my bright-eyed, beaming teacher greeting us every morning with the most
obscure holidays he could find. In that moment of recollection, I decided to look up the holiday. I don’t remember what special day it was, and I do not have to. The holiday was not important then, and it never will be. It was never about what I was celebrating; rather, it was about the unadulterated act of celebration itself.

I want to say celebration cured my mental illnesses, and all my woes are but faint memories in my now perfect life, but that would be dishonest and altogether unreasonable. Instead, celebration gave me a reason to wake up every morning and not pull the covers back over my head. It gave me a reason to fight the demons prowling within, constantly telling me to give up. Even while on a week-long stay at a behavioral health institution, I asked my parents to tell me the holiday every day during visiting hours. Once they left, I shared my joy with the other patients. They questioned me, for was it not a few days ago that I almost killed myself? How was I to explain that the near suicide attempt was the precise reason I had to share? I yearned for the joy in celebration, specifically in the midst of such despair and angst.

Today, I no longer require a holiday to celebrate. The mere fact that I am still alive and breathing is cause for great salutation. Through this turbulent journey, I have learned that I am worth celebration, regardless of performance or other’s acceptance. No longer do I have to fear that I am not enough – not because I am enough, but because I do not have to be. However, I continue to research the holiday every morning and announce it with jubilee to all I encounter. I may not need it anymore, but someone else will. There are other kids like me, fighting the monsters in their own heads, and if my teacher hadn’t shared the joy of celebration with me, I don’t know how many more scars I would have. I choose celebration because red and green should always mean Christmas.