PERSONAL ESSAY

In Defense of Lucky Charms

// BY STEPHANIE ALTSCHUL

Acorns without their hats were the unspoken symbol of my high school cross-country team. In pre-race warm-ups, we snatched nuts off the ground and sent them spinning around our palms, giving our hands motion for the next three miles and our legs a lucky boost.

Lucky talismans have carried me through the most treacherous parts of life — overdue essays, mainly. A childhood blanket, a silk charm gifted by my favorite teacher and a keychain from a far-off city have bestowed me with the good fortune I've needed to conquer the everyday struggles of a teenage girl — overdue essays, mainly.

As we approach the last two weeks of classes, and my last year as a "stupid frosh" — thanks, Fizz — I'm all the more grateful for my lucky charms. I can confirm, in fact, that finals are approaching because of the pre-law panic and the age-old question filling HQ classrooms: Should I Credit/D/Fail an A-minus?

During these trying times, I find myself reaching for something constant: a charm, a symbol or a scrap of memory that I hope is endowed with luck enough to raise my microeconomics grade a few points – and it seems my cross-country good luck charms have disappeared into the ether.

While a nondescript belief in "luck," whatever that means, is relatively shared among students I spoke with, the talismans vested with such a power vary wildly. I interviewed a few lucky first years to see how they're faring, and, selfishly, to find a replacement for my habitual acorns after the Old Campus resident rodents snatched them all up.

Paulina McConnell '29 totes a sentimental flashcard. I asked her to recount its story earlier this week.

"My best friend and I trudged to his house on the day of the first fall rain in California, made the flashcards before our AP Euro final, and burnt the edges on a spiced cardamom and cinnamon candle," she told me. "For my birthday, he made me a flashcard of the 'causes and effects of Paulina's 16th birthday' and seared the edges off. It smelled like the candle. I would pick it up and give it a good smell before my biggest tests."

Besides her flash card, Polly is no stranger to the luck of a mindful moment before a big test. "I also love to meditate," she says. "Just lay on the floor of my room the morning of and clear my head completely."

Mindful routines become superstitions on high-pressure days. Kai Zou '29 is careful not to leave his room without taking a few deep ritual breaths to steady himself. The last time he forgot, it ruined his concentration in the testing room, he claims.

Most people I spoke to regarding lucky tokens mentioned a special necklace or bracelet with sentimental value. I ascribe this pattern to how easy it is to remember — I make a wish whenever I rotate my necklace clasp to the back of my neck, while Hazel Dye '29 wears a necklace with her initials that reminds her of home.

During a study break in the Elm, Hazel pulled out a purple hippo stuffed animal from her backpack: Pebble.

"I bring her to every class; she's like a lucky token throughout the day," she told me. Superstitions aren't a big part of her test-day routine, but before curtain, she partakes out of habit. "In theater, everyone's superstitious," she told me. "If you say 'Macbeth' in a theater, it curses the show. I like to think that I'm not superstitious about those things, but then again, why take the risk."

For the most part, though, these lucky practices seem to be personal energy bolsters. Kiara Gonzalez '29 told me about the evil eye bracelet tradition in her family.

"Evil eye bracelets, or mal ojos, have been gifted to me from my close family members since I was little. Whenever they'd break, my mom would explain how they had absorbed the negative energy in my surroundings."

"I've been told that they don't work unless gifted to you by someone who loves you," Kiara elaborated. "It has a lot to do with someone else's love protecting you, I think. My mom gave me another over break and I feel like she's protecting me whenever I wear it."

Teresa Ng '29 detailed her ritual coffee before an exam. "If I have to do something nerve-wracking, I always have a coffee with me. It's not even about the caffeine. It's about the habit, the process and the ritual."

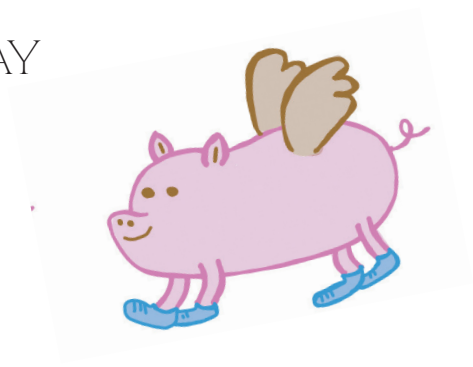
As we barrel toward reading week, I find myself surrounded by people who are, likewise, looking for light at the end of the tunnel, a path back to the routine of normalcy and moderately acceptable sleep schedules. A talisman promises this return. Lucky tokens work because they've worked before; we give them emotional power by proxy. They're lucky simply because we believe them to be.

As we descend into the pits of finals week, line your pockets with luck. Steal an acorn from an Old Campus squirrel, print out a photo of your dog, select a lucky bead from the floor of lower-level Bass Library or find some ephemera on the side of the road. Weave your personal history into a tiny, insignificant object. Let it be a compass through the weeks ahead, and remember that it's only good luck if you believe it is.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

When Pigs Fly



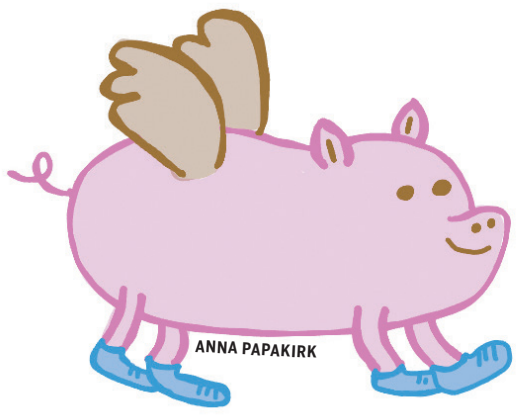
// BY ANNA PAPAKIRK

My hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, is colloquially known as Porkopolis. In the 19th century, it was one of the nation's largest meatpacking centers. Pigs were so numerous they could be found running unsupervised through the streets. Given the city's unique association with pigs, Cincinnati hosts the Flying Pig Marathon every May.

I enjoy running for pleasure, but I had no intention of running the race this year. The Flying Pig Marathon is one of the biggest events of the year. Thousands of Cincinnati runners participate in the 5K and marathon event. For me, it's one of those occasions where I think to myself, "I'll run a marathon when pigs fly."

When given the choice between sitting on one of San Juan's sandy beaches or running up and down Cincinnati's hilly terrain, I would definitely choose the former to be my spring break plans. First and foremost, I want to relax.

Second, I love



exploring new places, and traveling to Puerto Rico was a novel experience for me.

Nevertheless, over the break, I somehow found myself in sneakers on one Cincinnati's brutal uphill climbs. Allow me to explain.

On Friday, March 13 — that should have been an ominous sign — I wandered into my local Lululemon store. My friend Sophie and I had just finished a run, our first run in weeks, and upon entering, a staff member approached us.

"Did you just come from a run?" she asked.

I wasn't sure if it was because we looked extremely strong and athletic or sweaty and red in the face, but something about our look screamed "runners."

"Yes!" we replied in unison.

Next thing we knew, she invited us to participate in a Lululemon-sponsored run club that upcoming Sunday — just two days away. Sunday's weather was supposed to be exceptionally pleasant: 70 degrees and sunny, perfect for an outdoor activity. Sophie and I looked at each other and thought, "why not?"

And then, we got roasted like pigs. The anticipated route was 10 miles.

Our faces drained of our post-run rosiness when we heard the news. 10 miles? Just three short of a half marathon? We both looked at each other again, this time nervously. We explained to the staff member that we were not that serious about running, but she told us it would be "chill" and that we by no means had to complete the entire course. We could tap out at any point.

Feeling slightly more reassured, we ultimately decided that we'd do it but put no pressure on ourselves to do all of it.

Sunday morning rolled around, and we made our way back to the Lululemon store. The energy of the group was electric. The running group wasn't the typical clique of ultra-elite athlete best friends who'd been running together for the past 10 years.

As we ran, my expectations were proven wrong. Each mile after the next, we got to know everyone in our group a little better. Some were training for Cincinnati's annual Flying Pig Marathon. Some were college students, like us. Others had jobs that had taken them all over the United States. It was fascinating to learn everyone's story and their "why."

At about three miles in, we were feeling great — no pain, not out of breath. In fact, we were slightly chuckling, incredulous that we were actually doing this. What made the experience even more pleasant was the camaraderie we built with our fellow runners.

We were laughing until the halfway point. Approaching the fifth mile, fatigue set in slightly, but we had been cruising downhill most of the time, so the run wasn't that arduous yet. But what comes down must come back up. As we looped back around, I knew this would be a tough finish. My heart beat faster. My breathing grew louder. The lactic acid muscle build-up in my quads crescendoed to a maximum burn.

Nevertheless, the group's unwavering energy also intensified. Everyone was handing out high-fives, cheering one another on and offering words of encouragement to get us through the final stretch. Inspired by my fellow runners, I didn't want to stop. Ultimately, though, we did. At about mile eight, we had to throw in the towel and walk for a bit before running the final mile — but we felt far from defeated. If anything, we couldn't have been prouder.

I spent the first week of spring break tanning in San Juan, the only sweat on my face coming from the sun, not physically exerting myself on the hills of Cincinnati. While my gold medal performance was certainly the most unexpected part of my spring break plans, it was also surprisingly the most rewarding.

So, the next time you're thinking, "I could never do that," put on your running shoes. Join that run club. And make it the day when pigs fly.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

The lights at night are big and bright

// BY RIYA NADKARNI

When I got bored back home in suburban Texas — which was quite often — I would drive to the top of a parking garage and watch the city. Over the years, the lights that made up my city got brighter and multiplied, the town expanding into the rural nothingness around it. All I knew, all I had ever known, was that I wanted to get out.

I imagined a world that was culturally intense — a community where I could freely embrace every part of myself. Images of New York City were pinned on my walls, and I had Pinterest boards of all the foreign places I could never imagine going. On my walks to school I daydreamed about life in a big city, severed from the place I grew up.

I went back to the parking garage roof periodically throughout high school. The city was growing unprecedentedly quickly with new families, and every time I returned the lights seemed to stretch a little further. I had always felt taunted by the unknown darkness beyond the city lights. But every time the sphere of the city grew and a new bit of land was illuminated, the world became a little less mysterious.

When I got into Yale at the end of senior year, the end seemed in sight. I had so much fun at Bulldog Days. Senior year I developed a very clear vision of the college girl I would become: My confidence would magically grow, I would get tattoos, I would be able to grow my political activism.

In my first semester at Yale, I reached for my vision in every moment. I got the "Call me by your name" quote "Is it better to speak or to die" tattooed on my ribs, made as many friends as possible and never missed a single party. On the outside, I had achieved my goal. I had gotten out of suburban Texas and the new version of me was untouched by all I had experienced back home. I barely reached out to my hometown friends and posted all the time with my new ones.

But if I really looked, I caught glimpses of my hometown self all around campus. When I laughed, I would hear my mother. I surprised myself by listening to choir music after I swore to never join another choir. After hating stillness my whole life, I craved those rare moments of silence on campus. Everyone moved fast here. Instead of making small talk with the people at the crosswalk, jaywalking was optimal and all my meals lasted less than 25 minutes. I didn't understand why I was so unhappy at a place I had dreamed of being at my entire life. I hated boredom, the bustle exhausted me and my dream of expanding my horizons had become a dizzying reality. Upon reaching the massive milestone of college, I didn't transform — I became more aware of all things I couldn't let go.

My father, a math nerd, once told me that life is not a step change function but one of incremental change. In normal terms, a milestone does not change my future, but sums up my work to that point. I finally understood this wisdom when I returned to the top of the parking garage during spring break. The metroplex had grown so big that now the lights extended beyond my line of sight.

For a moment, the old restlessness crept in and I felt the hunger to outrun the limits of this place. But it didn't settle the same way it used to. In New Haven, I had morphed into the version of myself that I'd always imagined — more confident, more outspoken, more willing to take up space. It took coming home to realize that girl hadn't been created at Yale. I was looking at the lights and for the first time, I wasn't imagining another life. I was recognizing my own.

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