

The Coward

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The inside brim is dark with old sweat from my forehead. Ground-in mud, the color of dried blood, is spattered across the khaki-colored back. This hat has been around the world, starting in St. Louis, where my then boyfriend bought it for me. It's flown north to Minnesota, south to Atlanta, west to China, east to Iceland, Greece, Rome, Spain. Everywhere I go, the hat goes, too, covering my unwashed traveling hair.

An embroidered Scooby-Doo sits front and center of the hat, sloppy grin and sheepish eyes above a few unraveling threads. My younger brother and I used to watch the cowardly cartoon dog every afternoon, our skinny bodies squashed into the old blue armchair. With the snacks Mom had set out for us to find when we came home from school, we'd excitedly guess which monster would be chasing the gang today. "It'll be the Ghost Clown!" we'd laugh, or "the Phantom Shadow!" We were always wrong, but it didn't matter. Our favorite episodes were the ones with production flaws, like the one where Scooby's arm turns green for a half second or when Daphne's voice is played while Velma's

mouth moves. We howled with full-body laughter until our chair tipped over when these came on. Ten years later, those episodes are on DVDs safely shelved in my apartment while I wear my hat, trekking across Europe. My brother struggles to stay out of the hospital.

An acquaintance once told me he didn't know they made Scooby-Doo merchandise in "big people sizes." But I love the easily frightened, goofy Great Dane. Because sometimes I'm a little scared, just like Scooby. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to be seen with a kid's cartoon on my forehead, so I spin my hat around so the dog is hidden back by my neck. Sometimes I don't call my brother because I get scared thinking of the time he told me, after I moved to Missouri for college and he and Mom moved into her new husband's house, that he climbed up to that high roof and sat there thinking about jumping. I get scared thinking of the plans he once shared to buy a handgun or to close himself in the car, in the garage, engine running. And I get scared wondering what monster I must be—worse than a ghost clown or phantom shadow—that the fear of losing my brother often isn't enough to overcome my fear of the lonely red map he's carved into his wrist.

But sometimes I think of the iconic coward traveling along with me, and how in the end, he always came running when a friend was in danger. I think of my brother and myself back on our beige carpet with our fruit snacks and milk, rolling on our stomachs and singing our favorite theme song. I think of his brown eyes, shaggy dark hair, and sheepish smile and how they haven't changed, though his frame has stretched upward to loom over me, even with his self-conscious stoop. So sometimes I turn my hat back around, and with my stains covering thoughts of his scars, sometimes, I call my brother.

