

Hunger and Cigarettes

I was hungry the entire summer I turned fourteen. My dad had moved across town the previous January – with roughly twelve hours notice – and it was not a decision my mom took well. With him gone, the smell of smoke inside was the norm; my mom's habit increasing to where the cloud of smoke seemed to be a part of her, becoming a living shadow as she stalked up and down our empty living room. (Dad had taken our threadbare couch and chair, leaving us one T.V complete with broken rabbit ears.) The cigarettes soon became my mom's reason to get out of the house. She was up to a pack or two a day and I would often find myself watching from a window as she would leave to buy more.

I was sitting in front of the fuzzy screen of the T.V during my first week of summer vacation when I realized she had been gone longer than normal. We were low on food, and I assumed that she had stopped by the grocery store to get something for dinner. I continued to watch television until the darkness outside made me too uncomfortable to sit with the curtains open, and the pangs of hunger were too strong to ignore. The house was silent, a different kind of silence than I was used to. Growing up with deaf parents was a childhood dealing with silence on a regular basis – conversations without voice, television without sound, lights for the phone and doorbell instead of the usual ringing. But no one can be completely silent, and aside from my own feet creaking the floorboards there was nothing; even the settling of the house had stilled, as if it too were expectedly waiting.. My mom still hadn't come back from her cigarette run and she had been gone nearly three hours. I had no way to get in touch with her, and could do nothing but sit and worry near the back door, jumping at every sound I heard until I was too tired to stay awake. When I woke again, my mother was in the kitchen getting ready for work.

“Where did you go last night? I was worried.” I was signing quickly and with agitation, my sign for ‘worry’ sloppy and one-handed instead of the usual two.

“Out.” Her sign was just as sloppy; she didn’t even bother to raise her hand higher than her waist, moving it in one short jerky motion. It accompanied a one-shouldered shrug before she gathered her things and walked out the door.

And so this became a common thing; at first my mother would tell me she was getting cigarettes, sometimes going shopping, but then wouldn’t come back for hours at a time. Eventually she stopped telling me she was going anywhere, and soon after that she stopped coming home from work. I sometimes went days without seeing her. She was home so rarely, but her smoky shadow still permeated the entire house, like some sort of macabre puppet. I took every opportunity I had to leave the house myself, the heavy smell of the smoke chasing me out. I binged on food when I could, eating anything and everything that was offered to me; knowing I didn’t have any luxury in being picky and never being sure when I would have the chance to eat again. As a result my weight started fluctuating severely and I became an odd mix emotions I didn’t understand.

I took to confronting my mother the rare times we were both awake and home at the same time. I wanted to know where she was going, why she never stayed home or spent any time with me, why she couldn’t look at or talk to me. I wanted to scream at her for not taking care of me, for not even noticing that I had started eating foods with questionable expiration dates and how my clothes were starting to hang off my body in places they shouldn’t have. It was a fruitless effort though. Every confrontation ended only in anger and with my mother storming out and not coming back that same day or night. She didn’t want to talk about anything, and I couldn’t do a single thing about it.

I was at a loss. I had always been a ‘Mama’s Girl’; my father had been a man easily angered, and his drinking habit often turned him into someone who would yell and throw anything within reach. His anger was unpredictable and usually focused on me – he seemed to take particular delight in comparing me to my sister, his first-born – six years older and perfect in his eyes, but who had eloped at seventeen and hadn’t looked back, often yelling that I was a failure. As a child he terrified me, and my mother was always there to protect me from the brunt of his abuse. When he would begin to slam things around the house, she would take me for a drive to escape. When his comparisons to my sister were particularly cruel, she would hold me close and tell me I was beautiful. She became my hero, and when my father finally announced he was leaving, I felt something akin to relief. When he pulled me aside and told me there was room for me if I ever wanted it, I immediately declined. Why would I choose him over my savior? But now I was starting to regret my decision, I wanted to be happy and healthy again, but had no way of knowing if this man, who we hadn’t heard from since he left, would treat me any better, or if he would even want me.

With only a few weeks of my summer vacation left, I stole my mother’s keys while she was home and hid them so she couldn’t leave. I sat on the steps leading upstairs, digging my fingers into the thinning blue shag for support, and waited for her to try to leave. She didn’t even notice me as she walked by, and I was able to see her face without the mask of anger. I understand now that it was a face that portrayed hopelessness bordering on desperation, a desperate need to get out and away from bad memories. But to my young eyes she looked half mad; I didn’t understand where my kind and gentle mother had gone. Where was the strong and beautiful woman who had been my hero growing up? I watched as her desperation grew, familiar anger slowly leaking into her features as it took her longer and longer to locate her keys. Finally,

with a jerky movement she scanned the room and spotted me, saw my arms rigid and locked, knuckles white from gripping the carpet, my whole body vibrating with tension, ready for the coming heat of this confrontation to ultimately combust.

“Dani, where are my keys?” She was only using one hand to sign again, the other still digging around hopefully in her purse. I managed to untangle my fingers from the shag, wiping years of grime onto my shorts.

“I have them. You can’t leave until I want you to.” In my nervousness I had forgotten signs, and my fingers shook as I finger-spelled some of the words.

“We’ve done this before. I don’t want to talk about anything right now, especially not to you. Give me my keys.” Her voice echoed around the empty rooms and silent house and I knew she was angry. My mother never used her voice unless she was losing control.

“But you never want to talk about it. You leave before I can say two words and nothing happens. I don’t want you to leave.” As I signed along, my voice trembled, on the verge of tears – though she couldn’t hear it to care. “I haven’t seen you in five days. Do you know what I’ve been eating? Expired croutons.” I had found the bag of croutons tucked away in the back of a cabinet, behind an old can of carrots and an empty canister of coffee, not noticing until the second handful that they had expired the year before. My stomach quivered at even the thought of them.

“You have not, stop lying.” Her voice again, louder this time, offended that I would call her out on her actions. “I went grocery shopping the other day.”

“That was weeks ago. And you only bought milk and ramen.”

“Stop lying, and give me my keys. I won’t ask you again.” The normally pale brown mole high on her cheek had turned a bright red to match her cheeks and I noticed that she was slowly creeping toward me. I was suddenly terrified of her.

“Not until you tell me where you go all the time. Or at least tell me why you’re never home.”

“I have bigger problems than you right now, Danielle. Anything you have to say to me isn’t worth my time. Now give me my goddamn keys.” She had come up to the bottom step and moved to grab my arm, but I scrambled backwards and out of the way toward my room, grabbing her keys and throwing them down the stairs. She didn’t even look at me as she scooped them off the floor, grabbed her purse and left the house. It was another week before I saw her again.

In that same week, I knew I had to make a decision. I realized that it didn’t matter how my dad treated me, he would at the very least feed me. Before he had left he scribbled his new address and phone number on the back of an old receipt, and I stared at it, memorizing the numbers and what I would say to him, imagining only the worst of the outcomes for a week before I gathered up enough courage to call him. The only way to reach him was to call through a third party operator, someone who could talk to both him and me, and I cringed as I talked to a total stranger; her voice turning what should have been encouraging words from my father, into bored and listless mumbles. I didn’t explain why I wanted to leave, and he didn’t ask, but when he picked me up to show me where he lived, he was sober and greeted me with joy and a hug. He seemed like a whole new man, and I finally started to believe I was making the right decision.

In a rare show of generosity, my mother woke me up from a midday nap and took me to a restaurant down the street for lunch. After the waitress took our orders, I took my chance and explained to her how I felt, and why I was moving in with dad. She pulled out a cigarette, the smoke creating a distorted halo over her head. I was scared again; the look on her face had become the same one I had briefly glimpsed when she was trying to find her keys. Our meals came, and for the first time all summer, I wasn't hungry. My mother ate slowly and methodically, taking long drags of her cigarettes between bites and never looking my way or saying a word in response. When we had finished, she dug through her purse and pulled out some crumpled bills, asking me to go on up to the counter to pay while she went to the bathroom. As I waited in line I started feeling uneasy, I noticed my mother's careless flicks of her cigarettes had burned a small hole in the corner of the check. I toyed with it and wondered why it was taking her so long. When I had paid and she still hadn't shown up, I wandered over to where we had sat and then to the bathroom looking for her, my anxiety and uneasiness growing with every step I took. I headed outside to go to the car, and finally saw what I had been terrified to see – she had left without me.

I don't know how long I stood in the parking lot, my eyes darting from car to car, expecting to still see it, to see her somewhere right in front of me waiting, hoping that she hadn't really just left without saying a single word to me. At a loss I started to walk back. My mother's car wasn't there when I got home, and the house was again that eerie sort of quiet. I wandered from room to room, leaning against doorframes and looking in, trying to find something, anything, to help me piece together and understand the person my mother had become over the course of just a few months. Trying to understand how grief and resentment could twist my beautiful mother into someone I didn't recognize and hated.

Even now, with the distance of years, our relationship has never recovered. Sometimes I wonder if there was something I could have done, been a better daughter and able to prevent either one of us from getting hurt. Maybe somehow remind her of a time, curled together under the blankets on her bed, when her large soft hands would help guide mine into tiny replicas of the 'I love you' sign.