

## “When Suburbia Speaks”

In the early hours when mom sleeps sideways on the bed and the dog’s eyes are still heavy, I look forward to having coffee alone. I sit at the kitchen table covered in newspapers awkwardly folded and stacked, napkins, a set of keys, and a wide, blue bowl containing three mini oranges, a red onion and scotch tape. I sit and wait for the house to come alive. This happens slowly at first, then all at once. The house breathes. I notice which coats are flung and which are carefully set on the backs of chairs. I notice the life, the parts of the house that sigh and the parts that choke.

Dad’s office sits behind the kitchen and smells of cigarettes. On his desk are stacks of letters, bills, and other important papers. There is a pattern within the chaos, a reason why the 3-pack of golf balls sits on the left of the desk and the Fritos lay folded on the right and a pamphlet reading *Our Lady of Fatima* with a portrait of Mother Mary rests directly atop the shelf in the center.

Each object tells a story. The mittens defrosting on the kitchen counter leave little pools of water and say something about winter and bad habits. This is the stuff that passes quickly and is forgotten by the history books. Who will tell the future generations about stale Cheerios and half-drunk liters of Diet Pepsi going stale? Who will tell about what it meant to have parents that worked 60 hours a week in shiny offices with tiny windows?

I remember the earlier years when it was expected that dad would come home angry at something. He hated the cartoons dancing on the television screen; he hated the soccer cleats crowding the front door, the slow ice machine in the refrigerator, the bodies of dog hair that gathered in the corners of the kitchen; and he told us about all of it without saying a word. His tie spoke by the way it strangled him beneath his suit. Each tie told a story of exhaustion. The silver wristwatch with the large, black face clung to him. It asked him constantly with a terrible politeness to remember the time, remember the time, the time, so that even before bed it had its place with him upon the nightstand.

Mom did her best to balance out the stress. She led my Girl Scout troupe in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade and drove carpool. She drove “mom’s car”, a Chevy Trailblazer with grey, fuzzy seats that let me sleep or pretend to sleep while Rod Stewart played. Every car-ride my personality developed slightly. It was routine that we drove an hour outside of St. Louis past an isolated Wal-Mart and scattered farms to a stretch of three mowed fields outlined in ponds and swamps where I had soccer practice. In the summer, swarms of flies congregated around the lamps that kept the fields lit past 9 o’clock. During fall we packed sweatshirts in our bags in case the temperature dropped. We never saw the fields in winter. They probably froze over. We played on uncorrupted soil—beat up only by the feet of young girls gaining confidence with a soccer ball. Who will speak about damaged soccer cleats and white nets wearing and stained with mud?

Time passes. Relationships shape-shift and transform like a tree aging and gaining height until it leans a little and dies and another trees sprouts and buds. Dad got happy. Some nights I spot him and mom kissing in the kitchen, her back to his chest, their hands locked, her head bent towards his. She bought a book on learning to forgive and frequent flowers from dad started showing up on her office desk. My brother and sister and I could sense they were having sex again. When the two of them sighed, the house sighed. Their bodies were older than the house and for that reason, the most experienced objects it contained.

Our suburb neighborhood sits 15 comfortable minutes outside of St. Louis city. It also ages. Mom tells me how dad started a tomato garden on the left side of the house after all of the kids left, and about the family down the street who lost their son. He drank and drove and was found dead at 4:30 am on the side of Tesson Road with his body twisted and his neck snapped sideways. Like this, the neighborhood and every other object change. The objects describe time to me. How it leaves nothing unaltered. How it makes broken, purple corpses out of young men and grounded fathers out of chain-smoking, bullying dads.

Our district holds over a hundred homes, trashcans, and mailboxes. Each yard offers a bush or a plant or something like it. There are families and cereal boxes and ashtrays with marble surfaces like dads that tell the stories no one wants to hear—stories about tired fathers and suburbia and loneliness and dreams that persist anyways. Some houses offer porches like ours where two neglected hockey sticks rest in the corner against a brick wall.

When suburbia speaks few listen besides the blue jays and the cardinals darting from tree to tree and the hawk that sometimes perches on the tallest oak in our back yard. When suburbia speaks I have to turn off the television and listen real close like nothing else matters. Sometimes if I'm lucky I can hear it when the house is quiet and I'm alone and there aren't any cars on the road, the coffee stained mug, the toast crumbs on the glass plate, dad's black leather wallet busting with too many one dollar bills on the table, the objects in their stillness, all make magic.