

Spaces Unremembered

March, 2013. I hid a piece of paper inside the walls of my childhood bedroom. Between the small cavity made of panel and stud, I tucked a folded scrap of notebook paper. The blue pen I used immediately bled through and became visible on the near-translucent sheet bought at the dollar store earlier that year. From thirty or so feet away, our fridge door swung open and slammed shut—the sound of a Bud Light bottle cap rang and spun against the tiled kitchen floor, reverberating in my ears as I tried to hurry. The tiny piece of paper was folded so tight, edges so sharp that I could get a painful cut from one careless flick of your finger. I picked the opening that had a half piece of stud nailed against the wall, serving as a nook of sorts, knowing even at eleven that if I, or anyone else, were to break down the wall, the note would be ready to be read.

April, 2012. Torrential downpours. Sweet magnolia trees. My parents decided that a small portion of our dining room, in our already cramped house, would be turned into a makeshift bedroom after my sister threw all of my ten-year-old belongings into our bathtub. An amalgamation of all the goodies I had acquired over the course of my childhood, carelessly thrown into our scum-filled, black-mold-ridden tub while I was away at school. Beady-eyed stuffed animals, my water-damaged baby blue Nintendo DS, sparkly Justice shirts, all strewn against porcelain. My lofted bed and minimized presence were no compensation for a fifteen-year-old sharing a bedroom with the baby sister she never wanted. No amount of extra space seemed to be enough for her when everything I did made her seethe; I know she always resented that Mom and I were closer than they were. Maybe she thought Mom loved me more, that this potential favoritism justified my sister's actions and hatred toward me.

My new room didn't have walls, though. And we needed a quick fix, something Dad was always good at, although his mending of issues rarely held up well. He'd picked bed sheets. Blue

and purple stretches of tattered cotton were thumbtacked to the ceiling of our dining room, giving me a false sense of privacy. Still, I found myself cornered by the tar-ridden, cigarette-scented air on the first floor of our tiny family home. Contempt, analogous to my sister's, emanated from my skin; it was the anger we both inherited from our father. I was livid that she got security and safety upstairs while I got an unshielded place from our father's drunken rages. No escape from the sound of his toolbox crunching against another one of my phones. The fifth one he had broken that year because I kept going over our data plan. The noise was still ever-present inside my linen-walled dungeon.

I didn't understand until I was much older that my sister was also grappling with how to navigate the minefield that was our dad's harsh tongue and yeast-filled breath. There is no denying that he always targeted me when in search of a fight, and that she always dogpiled on for his approval. We're a loud, eccentric, Jewish-Italian family, where three overlapping conversations, flailing arms making exaggerated hand gestures, and quick-witted humor were the norm. "We're pizza-bagels," as our mom would say, "We're not for everyone, but you have to be able to keep up with the chaos to fit in." I can only imagine that it's hard to be the oldest, most misunderstood child. I can imagine that, for my sister, as a teenager with autism who always felt like she was on the outside of every inside joke, it was a no-brainer to take the opportunity to feel in on something for once—even if it meant siding with my dad and destroying our relationship in the process.

August, 2012. Sticky heat. The return to school. 5th grade. Four months since my eviction, and still, sheets for walls. But my icy metal loft was swapped for a noisy and chipped sleigh bed. Loud creaks and whines emitted from the white wood with every turn I made, every breath. The mere sound of movement from my room sent my father, who started sleeping on the living room

couch, into a spiral. I felt like a yet-to-be-rescued dog with a bell around its neck, scolded for moving when I shouldn't be, for making a bit too much noise when excited, for existing. My bedroom's lack of walls made it impossible to ignore my sister when she would walk by and tell me I was fat or brainless to get a chuckle out of our dad. Even harder to hide when our alcohol dependent father threatened to murder-suicide me, my mother, and him on a night with too much bourbon and not enough love coursing through his veins.

As I get older, I try to forge forgiveness for his actions. I attempt to rationalize the years of torment he caused us by looking into his own troubled past—he had an alcoholic mother and absent-father-turned-pedophile to look up to. He was a lonely only child, growing up in extreme poverty, always having to pave his own way, even begging for meal swipes from fellow students when he finally made his way to college because he couldn't afford his own meal plan. He's a true, blue-collar, "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," Ohioan. My mom tells me he used to be kind, though I've never known this version of my father. That he wrote poetry about his adoration for her when they first met. How he used to take my sister to daddy-daughter dances and would spend hours playing catch with my brother.

In a way, I understand my father's struggles. I know firsthand how easy it is to turn to alcohol to deal with multiple traumas. I've heard the horror stories of trying to raise a family during the economic crash in 2008. I want to believe that if he could have been a better father to me, he would've. I tried to chalk his actions up to the illness of addiction that plagues so many families. But I've now known the sober version of my father for the past six years. And the hardest thing I've had to come to terms with is that the alcohol was never the cause of his actions. Sure, the liquid courage gave him the gall to be as volatile as he was, but his abuse never went away. Between the multiple near-death experiences and intense substance dependency

throughout the years, I have tried relentlessly to find forgiveness for his vile actions in the moments I thought he may really be gone. But I am not God. I'm not required to forgive anyone for their sins. I have the discernment to know that my father, too, deserves sympathy, maybe even forgiveness. But for now, he won't find absolution from me, even if I wish he could.

October, 2012. Fall. Wet earth. A Tuesday. My Dad's white Silverado truck was out of commission, and he had just run out of Bud Light. Nearly bored to death with no fights to pick, work to do, or drinks to down, he finally found time to nail the studs into place. Stripped pieces of taupe wood stood a foot and a half apart, finally forming the frame to my bedroom. It still lacked actual walls and insulation, with sheets serving as the divider against the turbulence that resided in our home, but at least there was structure. A promise for a hopeful future. A potential that things may, could, *would* get better. After finishing the twenty-minute job that he put off for six months, he walked across the street to replenish his liquid life at the local bar. The lack of a working vehicle couldn't stop his instinctual craving for sanity in a bottle. I don't think anything ever could. He always said alcohol was more reliable than therapy. That he'd rather die drinking, doing what he loved, than live a boring, sober life.

It's a strange thing to look back on now and realize that the animosity I feel towards much of my adolescence still resides as a bottomless pit in my stomach. I retell stories of my childhood with a very blasé attitude and tone most times because it was a pattern I became used to— a lived experience and nothing more. It's not until I'm met with my friend's faces contorted in horror as they try to compare my childhood with their stable upbringings that I remember how disheartened I'm supposed to feel. Or when I try to recount a portion of my younger years for a short story, and every conflicting emotion of rage and sorrow and white-hot pain overtake my brain like 2013 was just yesterday. But I could never pretend like I don't understand why my dad

made some of the choices he did. It's easy to understand him when I think about the nearly 600 days straight I spent drunk, doing genuine damage to my liver as an attempt to cope with escaping an abusive relationship. I feel myself shapeshifting into him anytime I can't internalize my anger, and spite spills out of my mouth— suddenly I'm a 5 '10, crewcut, 57-year-old man who can't control his temper.

So much of who I am comes from him. I'm quick on my feet when it comes to keeping banter going. I listen to more music than I do my own thoughts, allowing Led Zeppelin or Donny Hathaway to quiet out my overactive imagination and intrusive thoughts that I can never seem to escape. I have relentless night terrors, waking myself up or the person I'm sharing my bed with in a sweaty, panting panic. I'm drawn to creating art and writing just like my father, who was once a creative writer during his own college years. I can almost feel his hand moving my own as I write a new piece, allowing the darkest parts of my brain to spill onto a page and call it a story. My eyes are near-perfect replicas of his, somehow still winning the title as my favorite physical feature I have, despite the reminder of struggle it brings me. I am a shattered mirror of my father, every part slightly distorted, but too similar to ever pass off as my own.

January, 2013. Winter. Misery that bore deep into the bone. Clattering teeth. Limbs shivering under blankets. I learned very quickly that there's not much warmth in a room made up of bedding. My sister had just told me that I was an accident again— that Dad never wanted me; he only ever wanted two kids. He'd had their names picked out since his own childhood. Luke and Claudia. As much as I loved my brother, Luke was barely around once he hit middle school. To cope with our father's actions, he was constantly out getting high with friends on whatever combination of weed, alcohol, and pills they could find. My sister showed me pictures of the vacations our family used to take, something I had never been on before. She pulled up the

professional photo shoots of the Corbisseros, sans Sophie. Big smiles, even bigger hugs— a happier time. A happier life. A happier family. I could see the truth in my sister's words in these pictures. Without me, they were a version of the Corbisseros that I never knew was capable of existing. No constant fights about money, none of my dad driving home on the rumble strip because he was too drunk to stay in his lane, both children clinging to each other with giant toothless grins. My mom always tried to tell me that I was a happy surprise, never an unwanted accident. But I don't know if I'll ever believe anyone felt that way other than her.

Nine months had passed since I was first moved into what we called my bedroom. I kept being told my dad would put up the walls soon. That I needed to just let him find a day when he had the time. That his drinking wasn't hindering anything, it was just a way for him to unwind from the stress of life. That he cared about my safety and comfort and would change things soon. I kept trying to hold out hope. To fully trust that what my mom kept promising me of completion and love was right around the corner. But no matter how hard I tried to muster up an ounce of faith, I found it hard to believe an end to the construction was near when he never did what he promised.

I try to not resent my mother for the blind eye she's always turned to my dad's behaviors. While most children sobbed at the thought that their parents may get a divorce, I wept at the knowledge that mine never would, that she'd never leave him. Years' worth of choking on my own pleas for her to break out of this cycle were consistently met with excuses. Over a decade later, with multiple abusive relationships of my own to reflect on, I know just how nonsensical and deluded you become finding ways to excuse abusers' harm. It doesn't escape me that she was— *is*, just trying to do her best, to navigate how to remove herself from the person she's been with for over forty years. Her first love, her first boyfriend, the father of her children, the one she

expected to be a good life partner. My mother has always been my haven, whether it's me calling her cause I didn't know how to work my first-ever apartment's oven, or hiding in her arms as my dad almost choked our dog to death, she has saved me time and time again. I wouldn't be here without her in more ways than one. But then she tells me she chose to stay with him because I asked her not to give up at seven years old. And when I remember that a large reason I stumbled into the abusive relationships of my own was because harmful love was the only kind I'd ever been shown, I can't help but allow bitterness towards her to engulf me, despite how much love exists there, too.

February, 2013. An early Spring. Hay Fever. Dusty black clumps of German Shepherd hair caked into the green carpeting of our living room, compliments of the 70's. The same bedsheets from ten months prior had begun creating wind tunnels against the structure's hollowed studs as cool air blew through the open windows. My bedspread aged with me as I approached my eleventh birthday. My blanket transformed from the hot-pink, black-zebra-striped spread into an elegant mix of black and gray. Eiffel towers, sparkles, and *Carpe Diem* were splattered across the comforter, serving as a much-needed change of scenery and newfound sense of maturity. A matching chest lived at the foot of my bed, full of No Fear Shakespeare books and old movie tickets. A mini Eiffel tower adorned with necklaces and earrings decorated my nightstand. My whole room became a shrine to Paris. A reminder that escape was possible. Ohio wasn't forever. That my life would not always sound like a dive bar fight and feel like repentance for a past existence. *Libre comme l'air*. I, too, would be as free as air one day, just as my Paris-themed comforter promised.

I still had a lot of work to do before being free, and I was far from an easy child. My cocktail of mental illnesses had yet to be properly labeled, and my navigating of puberty was

impossible for anyone to understand. Multiple times a month, my sister, mother, and I would get into screaming matches, turned-fistfights. The perimenopause woman vs. preteen vs. teenager was a chilling battle to witness or be a part of. I never had the strength either of them did; I couldn't punch or kick as hard, so I would resort to pinching and biting. My sister still has the remnants of fingernail scars on the back of her right arm. I would go blind with rage and use words as my weapon. I'd target their deepest insecurities, use their secrets against them, I'd tell them all the things they never wanted to believe— things I didn't believe myself but knew would hurt them. For such a long time, I truly believed that there was no hope for me getting better. I feared that the thrashes of my words would constantly beat out my brain, even though I regretted each attack the second they came out. Even though I eventually put in years of work to make a real change, I still come from a line of people who've hurt those they love beyond comparison. I don't expect exoneration for these behaviors. I can't justify my actions if I'm not willing to do so for my father. I just have to keep trying to be a better person every day.

March, 2013. Deep purple hyacinths in bloom. The month of my birthday. An unseasonably warm March. Eleven months had passed since my bedroom walls transformed from dark blue popcorn drywall into cotton and polyester. It was a Wednesday. I had come home from school to see my Dad nailing pieces of chocolate brown hardboard panels into the studs that had been waiting to be covered. The swirls of stain that were supposed to emulate wood were clearly unnatural, just as my father's choice of finishing a project he started was. Of course, no insulation or fiberglass was stuffed between the empty spaces, he said that would take too much time and effort for "just a bedroom." Before finishing, he went to the kitchen to grab another beer, and I ran to find the closest piece of paper. Over a decade later, no matter how hard I think, I can't remember what I wrote down.

Maybe it was a question for my future self. *Does Dad ever get sober? Who will win American Idol this year? Do I ever get out of Ohio?* An Al-Anon address? Even at eleven, I memorized the name of the organization for families dealing with an alcoholic. It could have been the lyrics to *Girl on Fire* by Alicia Keys. *She's livin' in a world, and it's on fire. Filled with catastrophe. But she knows she can fly away.* Or, potentially, the address of my dream college. Then again, I truly never expected I'd live past my early teens— whether that was my father's doing or my own. Maybe it was the password to my Tumblr account. The things I wished my father had said to me— that he is sorry for his behavior, that he loves me. It could have been the title of my favorite novel at the time. A list of places I wanted to run away and start anew. *Chicago, New York, Paris, anywhere but Ohio.*

July, 2025. Scorching heat. Humidity that made everything drip. One month until I moved to Boston. I had to stop by my parents' house, the place I once called home, to gather my remaining belongings to pack for my upcoming move. I always hated the fact that my parents refused to move out of the home that brought all of us so much pain. There isn't a single space in the house that is, or feels, truly clean. Sinks are caked in months' worth of toothpaste and the grime that comes from working hands. Most surfaces haven't been wiped down or dusted in years. Each of our childhood bedrooms eventually turned into storage spaces for my parents to hoard more belongings.

The very day my sister moved away for college in 2014, I took all of my things from my makeshift bedroom downstairs and claimed territory over the room that was once ours. Finally, I had a space to call my own. No sister to share it with, real walls, a door with a lock— I remember feeling all of that weight and pressure slip off my shoulders and roll down my back. A breath that I wasn't aware I was holding exhaled from my mouth, and with it, a small sob. I ran my fingers

over the old blue carpeting of the room and took deep breaths, trying my best to center myself. Sitting on my knees as if I were praying, I let everything out. Deep screams escaped from my mouth in our empty house, and all I heard back was a peaceful quiet. I had always dreamed about freedom, the way it felt, the way it sounded. At that moment, I knew I still hadn't fully reached independence in the way I needed, but I knew it wasn't far away, and eventually Boston would make that come true.

Eventually, my old, jury-rigged bedroom turned into my mom's office and workout room. A desk where my old bed used to live, a walking pad, and a standing bike. In place of my chest of books, boxes of unlabeled documents that my parents refused to get rid of. Eventually, my sister's twin bed from her dorm room took up a large chunk of space as she needed a place to sleep when home for the holidays, and finally, she saw how flimsy that room was. Just as effortlessly as I erased my sister's existence from her childhood bedroom, my mom left the memories of mine behind.

When I stopped by to finish packing, and every other time I'd entered that house since graduating high school, I tended to avoid my old bedroom. I normally would beeline for my newer, more secure bedroom upstairs, away from the chaos of my dogs barking and painful memories downstairs. But during what I knew would be one of my last visits to that home before moving, I couldn't help but stop and stare at the now warped pieces of panel that formed my old room. My head cocked sideways, and my eyes traveled along the length of the walls. I wondered how so much could change over the course of twelve years, over half of my life so far. I walked towards the mismatched door to my room, white, but yellowed from years of cigarette smoke, drastically contrasting with the deep brown paneling, and breathed. My hand slightly shook as I turned the handle and entered the room.

It looked different from what I remembered growing up. It actually was quite beautiful when viewed in a new light, ignoring the clutter around the room. The house's original exposed stone fireplace from the 70's decorated the longest wall, with random tchotchkes adorning the mantle; a small box containing a USB drive of my high school senior photos, a vintage, bronze candle stick with a large sun emblem on the front, melted crayon art of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* that my sister made, a jewelry box with a vibrant picture of the cast of *The Wizard of Oz* that played "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" when you opened it. My old wood dresser stood to the left of the fireplace, squeaky and empty when I pulled the drawer open to look inside. To the left of my mom's desk, forgotten, small, circular mirrors were fixed to the wall, unable to be pulled off after all this time.

I bent down slightly to get a better look at myself in the mirrors. Alternating sizes, the largest only slightly bigger than the base of a mason jar, it warped my face in a way that made my head look giant, and my neck look tiny. I couldn't help but laugh at the sight of myself in what became analogous to a fun house mirror after so much time had passed. I changed the way I stood slightly to see myself from all different angles. I squatted down a bit further to see my forehead grow, stood up more straight to watch my head shrink down, and turned my face right to left to try and catch a glimpse of my side profile. After a few minutes, though, I stopped. I stopped and stared straight at the mirror, deep into my own eyes, and could almost see eleven-year-old Sophie. Her big, round face and permanent furrowing of her brows. I could feel her presence in the room— the somber, suffocating feeling of being a preteen in an abusive household.

I turned over my right shoulder and made eye contact with the spot I put the piece of paper in back in 2013. As I approached the wall, I held out my hand, surprisingly wanting to keep

distance between myself and the thing that held the answer to the question I've had for years: what did I write? I softly brushed my fingertips against the cool, faux wood and waited in anticipation for the feeling of needing to know to come, but it never did. My mouth didn't dry up with fear, my hands didn't form beads of sweat, despite the summer heat, my mind didn't start to race. There was nothing I could do other than allow my hand to drop to my side, and look around as if I was missing something. But for once, I wasn't. I didn't feel the need to break the wall open, or salvage the note, or even guess for the hundredth time what could possibly be written down. For once, I found myself able to let go of it: to feel all of the things I lost during that time in my life— privacy, sanity, freedom, safety, normality. And then, I discovered comfort in making the choice to never get the answer to what was left behind. Leaving the rest as forgotten memories. Times moved past. Spaces, willingly unremembered.