

Living In-Between

SHORT STORY

Isadora Eden Davis, Grade 12, Pittsburgh CAPA School, Pittsburgh, PA. Educator Unavailable; Point Park University, Affiliate. Silver Medal, **New York Life Award**

I'm pacing back and forth through these empty hallways. Trying to figure out some profound way to say goodbye. Lizzie has carved our family name into the plaster of the basement walls. Oliver planted his lemon tree. Ricky is sobbing and moaning by the moving truck so loud I'm sure his cries will be preserved and fossilized in the next million years.

Momma says I can't steal a floorboard or a door handle, so I'm left figuring out a way to keep a part of me with the house, instead of the other way around. Maybe I could just burn the whole house down. Kill it while its last memories are still of us. Or maybe I could kill myself right here and now and beg Lizzie to stuff my body inside the rafters. Maybe I'll just take a piss on the kitchen floor and hope the stink lingers forever.

Eventually, I swing open the door to what used to be the office. I lean against it and crouch down, fitting my frame in the corner. The lights are out and I cradle my knees. I am blanketed in darkness, protected by its gaping mouth. Keep me behind your ebony teeth.

In the dark anything is possible.

Time loses its shape and melts into the blackness. It could be 9 pm, or 3 in the morning. Tomorrow could be a school day, or the start of winter break. I could be 8, and Dad could be right next door. It's all the same in the dark. Sometimes I think if I'm quiet and still enough, I can even teleport back in time. It hasn't happened yet but one day it might.

I take my mind back to three years ago on my 10th birthday. I'm thinking hard, focusing on how

I walked down the steps smelling eggs and butter. How I heard Daddy talking with Oliver, when he was still Ollie, and then their exciting whispers once they hear me creaking down the stairs. I can hear them moving around. And then I see them. Bright and saturated, the way all good memories are. Daddy has his smile that makes his eyes disappear, and Ollie is yelling for everyone else to come greet the birthday girl. I'm grasping at every detail, hoping God will let me stay here forever. The walls are hugging my body so tight, or maybe it's my arms. I'm never opening my eyes.

But then I feel the door open, and Lizzie is grabbing my shoulder and pulling me up. She says it's time to go. My eyes are still closed, and I refuse to even so much as wiggle a toe, so she shakes me and yells to "stop fucking around." I don't know when she started cussing at me. She's pulling me through the hallway and down the stairs, and I'm tripping over my legs. I know if I tumble down these steps she won't do a thing to stop me, so I crack open an eye. Walls are flashing past me and I pull myself out of her grip to get one good last look at the living room and kitchen. It's so barren and empty. So disturbingly different, and yet, how is it that it still smells like home? Lizzie reaches for my arm again, but I move and start walking to the door on my own. I almost don't notice that the living room rug is still there. That big old red Persian rug, like a soldier left to die on the battlefield. I can't believe Momma's not taking it with us.

We're all packed into the car. Ricky is to my right, shaking quietly as sobs hit him. Lizzie's behind the wheel and Momma's riding shotgun. Momma's silent as always, and wearing that empty expression.

She's looking out the window, but I know she doesn't really see anything anymore. Oliver's up in his dorm in Virginia. He said he has too much work to catch up on to be with us during the move. Lizzie turns the key, and while the engine rumbles and we're pulling out of the driveway, my eyes are glued to Daddy's bedroom window. It's still open. I can almost hear the wind whistling inside.

And now I'm staring at the house. It's that house now, I suppose. When I'm older I'll probably call it my childhood house. I crane my head as we're driving away, trying to soak up as much of that house as I can. And all I can think about is the window cracked open and the rug left in the living room. I never figured out how to say goodbye to that house. I close my eyes.

* * *

In the summer before third grade, when I had that stomach bug, I threw up so much in that house, I swear when you put your nose right up to the big rug in the living room, you can still smell my puke. When I lost my tooth at 5 and smeared the never-ending spout of blood from my gums all over the white bathroom walls, I did it in that house. I danced so hard and sang so loud I shook the foundations in that house. I stayed up all night howling back at the wolves from my bedroom window in that house.

And now, like always, my thoughts drift back to you. You raised your children in that house. You yelled and berated me until I got my times table right in that house. You held me all night until I fell asleep, even when my tears must have soaked the whole mattress and carpets in that house. You pinned every good grade and essay on the front door of that house. You told me you fell to your knees when you first saw that house. That you knew your life would be in that house.

And now they're leaving that house.

And we died in that house.

Well, you more than me.

It wasn't sudden, and maybe that was worse. You witnessed your body betray you. Your time run out. I watched your skin thin like a kitchen rag that's been washed too many times. Your teeth stick out, yellowed and browned, as your face melted and stuck to your skull. During those weeks in hospice, your eyes used to shift around, anxious and full of fear. You'd whisper to me not to worry, that you wouldn't die -- you couldn't. And then one day after building up the courage outside your door to enter, your eyes almost made me cry out. They were glazed over now. Once ice-blue and piercing, now faded and lazily moving along the wall. Sometime during the night, they left you too. Terror froze up every limb of my body, but I pushed myself next to you. Forced myself again and again into that haunted room to sit by your side and mumble stories, and urge you to speak back to me. I swear, I could see your life spill out around you. I saw it pool around your fingers and mouth, the way steam hovers over boiling water or baked potatoes.

3 days before you died, I stopped visiting you. I couldn't bear it. By then, you were just a mess of flesh and bones. I curse myself for it now. I realize that I, too, am amongst the things that abandoned you.

You died staring up at that ceiling. Died inside that room, those 4 walls Momma painted pink one summer. I keep thinking about how you hated that pink.

Sometimes, when I laid in your bed after you died, I just stared up too. I tried to imagine what your eyes fixated on. If you traced the crack in the ceiling that kind of looks like a cat, or if you timed your blinks with the blue ones of the analog clock on the TV shelf. Or if you just looked on at nothing as your mind decayed. As your spirit left, escaped through your lips with a final breath. I opened the window

after you died in case it was still trapped there. In case it didn't know how to leave, drifting around frantically in the corner. I was crying as I did it 'cause secretly I wanted it to stay. I wanted your ghost to live in the walls so I'd have you forever. But any remnant of you would have hated me for that. When I was little and would cry and fight you, dig my legs into the ground and tug on your arm, sometimes you'd look back and laugh. You'd close your eyes and shake your head. A tired smile on your face. You'd call me my daddy's girl. No one could ever tell me what to do.

I often wonder if love is trans-dimensional. If you can feel it where you are. My love feels like waves, but not the lapping gentle kind, sloshing against an overflowing bathtub, instead, it's the crashing type. Slamming against the beach. My love for you crushing the sand, causing a thunderstorm. I can barely breathe sometimes, choking on all this love I can't give you. All this love piling up in my arms. With no home, it stays in the back of my throat, in this massive crater that now lives inside my chest. I think it's 'cause you took part of me when you left. I don't mind. In fact, I feel relief knowing there was so much of me that belonged to you. Who am I, if not your daughter?

* * *

Two falls ago, when I cradled my body in that bathtub, I said I don't remember that day. I do.

Sometimes I relive it in my dreams. I watched as the water turned pink. Ribbons of red floating by. It doesn't hurt after a while. After a while, it feels real nice. I hadn't slept in days. I barely remembered what it felt like to feel tired. And then I felt gentle hands wrap around my mind. Holding me. It felt like you, Dad. I could relax. I could smile. I think I cried, but I don't know. I thought of God's kindness. His unrelenting generosity to give me you at my end. I remember what it feels like to die. It's pleasant and tender. It feels like when you're half-asleep in

the car so your daddy has to carry you inside. Your eyes are closed and you're at peace, but you can hear the echoes of the world around you. Hear your parents talk about what to cook for dinner. Hear your sisters and brothers shuffle inside. It all sounds underwater. As if you strayed into some dream.

I was holding my knees and my soaked-through jeans, but I was flying. Someone was carrying me, and I could feel my body rock back and forth with their steps. I wasn't there in that bathroom. I could hear the world. I could hear wind and birds. I could hear Momma's snores and Lizzie's scribbles in her book. I was safe. And far away from it all.

But seconds later I heard something awful. Something howl. Death's grip was firm, but this rattled it. I wanted to scream for this thing to shut up. That I was so close.

And then I was back, and lights were too bright, and things were too hard, and edges were too sharp. I could smell the disinfectant in the air. I was alive and furious. But then I turned and saw you, Daddy. Sitting in a plastic chair by me. And I was drowned in shame.

I didn't write a note. Momma screamed at me until her voice was hoarse because of that. Said she knew I never loved her.

There's a horrible crack in that bathtub from one of Momma's fits. I think she made it while trying to bleach the porcelain. I was looking at it one day, grazing my fingers over its edges, and I noticed something kinda rusty in the floor by the tub. In between the black tiles on the floor, there's the smallest bit of color in the glue. Dark red-brown dried up and caked in the holes of the cement. I think a piece of my soul lies there. In that house.

* * *

I open my eyes and let the soft glow of the sunset flood my mind. I stare until my sight spots from the

brightness. And even then, I stare, soaking up the sun. I don't stop until I can feel it drench my spine and ribs.

I guess I don't know how to say goodbye, which is funny, considering God has thrown me so many opportunities to make grand ones. I wonder if I think a good goodbye would have solved it all. Would have erased the pain. And maybe it might have helped, but it's hard to be good at goodbyes when you never want to say one. I think that's because I don't really believe in them, or really, how much value we put on them. Because truthfully, beginnings and endings aren't worth more than what it is they begin and end. Time controls the starts and stops, but we're everything in between. And I have to believe that it's the in-between-times that matter just as much. The actions and feelings that exist outside of life's linearity. The things we say and do that don't carry the responsibility of being meaningful. The moments in life that aren't predestined.

In the rearview mirror, I see Momma. As I'm watching her look out, her brown eyes following the horizon, I realize how young she looks, and how young she is. I even think she looks younger than Lizzie right now, especially with Lizzie's furrowed eyes focused on the road, driving all of us to a new house. Next to me, Ricky sleeps with cheeks that shine from all his tears. I reach for him, my baby brother. How can someone so small cry so much? Where does it all fit? I pull him closer, making his head and shoulders lie on my lap. I stroke his hair and hold him so tight against me. Sleepily, he hugs my elbows and knees. Something about the action, so tender and instinctive, hurts so much. I wonder if that's why Ollie couldn't be here. This reminder of all the love that impossibly still lives.

There is guilt and sadness inside me so ancient, I never knew when it came. And I don't know when it will leave. But I have learned that everything ends. All pages turn. And I know when I have scarred

over, there won't be a kind letter to help me learn how to live without a ball and chain. So until then, I will learn patience. Not by choice, but necessity. I am not looking for a conclusion, or the light at the end of the tunnel. I am just looking for my next breath. I am waiting to take another step. I will be gentle with others, and myself. I will live in between all the beginnings and endings. Daddy is in between it all, that house in between it all, and all my memories will be in between it all. And so I will take my time, even though I know how little of it exists, and how painfully unreliable it is, I take it anyway. I'll sit with my time. I'll let it do the work and I'll watch. I will forgive time.

And I decide that I will still love. I will love so many and so fully, even though I know how terrifying love can be, and how painfully unpredictable it is, I will love anyway. I will love deeply, and when that love dies, I will let it destroy me. I will let myself crumble into pieces. And then, I will let the wind of time nudge me back together. And with gentle hands, I will pick myself up. I will let myself go mad, but I will return. And love will return too. Every time. I will inhale. And then exhale. And the seconds will pass, and tragedy and joy will chase each other's tails, and I will inhale again. And exhale. I will love and I will hurt. Exhausted or excited, I will inhale and exhale. Until I can't anymore. And even then, the seconds will still pass, and all that time I spent breathing in between it all ended and began, will have mattered all the same. ■