

## Running for the Car

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When I was nine years old I slept about twelve hours a day most days so I could dream. Anything could happen in my dreams. In them I could see Mom and the boys in other places without our Dad. We had left home a few times and they were in those places but, as if we had not come back. Even the battered woman's shelter, tall and white was preferred. As simple as every house was on the street, the cars parked out front on the street, but with dry grass and no flowers, it was friendlier than our house. The biggest problem at that house had been keeping to a schedule to share with the other families. But my dreams were where I wanted to be. When Dad would come home after work, we would all suddenly need a nap, coming downstairs only for dinner while he was there. After dinner my excuse would be that I needed to go upstairs to finish homework. During the summer some other excuse would be used, whatever came to mind to escape being in the same room as him. My brothers and I would go to bed around eight so that we could be asleep no later than nine. This routine helped us to deal with the real life that was ours.

As much as I loved my brothers, I also felt a type of resentment at times. They were the chosen boys. The boys were in the larger room next to mine; they had just turned two and four. They had the bedroom at the top of the stairs. The only problem with it was that I would have to walk through it to get to my room. They had bunk beds and were allowed a mess. Their beds were also new, at least to us. They made tents from their sheets to hang down from the top bunk to hide in the bottom bunk. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were the sheets of choice, something else that they had that I didn't: new sheets. They would fight over who could pretend to be which one. Andrew would point but Michael would assign. The two would try to sleep together on the bottom but were not allowed. Dad had spent money on the beds and expected them to be used. He had covered them in a large sheet of plastic when they were purchased to preserve them. Every movement would make a crackling sound.

My only privilege of being the older child was a private room. My bed didn't have the plastic. My bed was the one that the previous owners had left in the house when my parents had bought it. The bed was probably close to thirty years old by this point. I never was given anything new. Even undergarments would have to be bought by someone else, Grandma usually, my Mom's mom, so that I could have at least them new. My clothes were from aunts that were close to twenty years older than me. I would be wearing green blazers with large gilded buttons and mustard colored parachute pants by twelve. I felt like this was my punishment at times.

My wanting this house was the cause of the family problems. It was now mine, and my parents' problems had seemed to get out of control once we were living in it. I now know that it was Dad's new job at Honda. He wanted a more materialistic life and with Mom's inability to handle any more than she already was, this was not a good combination. There was my brother being born, his adopting me being finalized. There was now a family in which he was responsible for. The house brought out new bills, with new desires. The list of reasons and excuses could go on for quite a while. The bottom line was that even though I felt that it was all my fault for wanting us to have more it was not me, it was Mom and Dad who were at fault.

I had loved our house for years before we could call it ours. We had lived just down the street before moving here. I was often told how I would walk down the street and stare at it. I had memorized the address and when asked would give it as to where I lived. The houses were back on the islands. Most were white and plain. This house that I loved was a dark brown that now I refer to as like poo, and close to the main street that connected the islands. It seemed so large, a straight flat front, it had only three windows and a garage to make it stand out. Coming from a little one story with no lake access, this massive two story house on the water was amazing. Indian Lake, Ohio was a place where no one wanted to live, except on the weekend during the summer. There were not many full time residents but I had loved it. I loved not only living on the lake but that no one was around when my parents started fighting.

I had headed to bed at the normal eight-ish and had fallen asleep soon after but, I was soon awakened. My Mom had screamed. Their fights were usually over quickly, but not so this time, the yelling continued.

"What have you done now?" Dad yelled.

It was her fault when he screamed. It always was according to him. He did nothing wrong. She must have screwed up the checkbook or maybe not picked up something. It could be the bacon for his weekend meal that he would treat us kids to. It could have been that he was down to his last Diet Pepsi and she didn't have more for him waiting. It could have been anything. This time it sounded like a money fight, which would be the worst.

"How can a grown woman not even know how to add and subtract?" he screamed.

The words told me that this could be a long night. I sat up in my bed. The old golden colored wood groaned under the sudden movements, the springs squeaking uncontrollably. I didn't want to lose the comfort of my blankets. I knew though that if I was awake, then so were the boys. I took my bottom blanket, a warm old off-white fuzzy thing and wrapped it around myself as I got up. The inherited, faded blue comforter was left behind.

"I'm sorry," I heard Mom whisper. It drifted up through the squares of the vent. It spoke more loudly to me than Dad's yelling would.

As I opened the door from my room to theirs, I looked down through the open vent. It was a black square with chipping paint that we would usually huddle around, twisting the slates one direction or another. We would watch and see what was happening but this wasn't a time to risk being seen by Dad. I could not see Michael in his top bunk so I knew that he had already moved down. The shadows moved behind the sheets that made our refuge. The turtles were lying sideways so that the whole width of the bed was covered. It was no protection from the words that drifted up so easily between the squares of the vent, but the lack of light drifting up was comforting. With no light and just these hate words, we three sat with our backs against the wall. I was in the middle and one boy on each side. We could hear Mom fall into the stools in the kitchen. The metal of the legs made a deceiving clinking sound that was almost musical.

"You are just so God damn stupid. What is so hard about doing what I tell you?" Dad yelled.

The boys didn't even ask what was happening anymore. It was an old story that was learned too young. We sat and I tried to tell some nothing stories that I could remember. Our books were downstairs so the stories were often made up ones. I could remember most of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. It was a cookie, milk, straw, napkin, mirror, hair, his hair made a mess he will need to clean, then need a nap and on and on. Something that could make someone act so submissively was just wrong to me. It was a mouse controlling the boy, not even another person. Here this boy is just doing what this mouse wants and then at the end has this mess to clean up; he is exhausted and a mouse that just wants to start the cycle again. The mouse was very annoying to me but Michael liked him. Michael liked the idea of having someone listen to even a mouse.

I even had made up a dinosaur story about a long neck looking for a home, for love. We had seen *The Land Before Time* and loved the story as well as the music. There was this group of kid dinosaurs of different kinds, working together to find their families. We wanted to find a better one. I would eventually write it down but having a copy of something that was so tied to bad time was not something that I liked. I would stop telling stories for years after that. I had hoped that my stories could help us; they did nothing.

"Damn you! How could you do this to me?"

Thud, something had hit the door downstairs in the bedroom, the door had not been closed completely. Mom hitting against

it was not a good sign. It proved that she was moving back and forth in the house trying to get away. The sound was followed by someone gliding down to the floor. We knew that it had to be Mom. We stopped talking and listened.

Smash, clang: The sound of other things falling and being broken were not usual. It sounded like glass breaking, keys jingling and papers rustling. Mom was back between the dining area and the kitchen. The two were separated by a small bar that came out from the wall. It was surrounded by the bar stools that we had heard earlier - more leftovers from the previous owners. The bar was the catch all area of the house. Mail would be left here, papers from school. Things that Dad was suppose to see or that he thought would be important.

The dining area was almost directly under the vent. We had not a kitchen table but a bar, so it sat up higher than a traditional table. For Mom to have knocked the stuff off of the bar she had to have had her arm out, maybe to try to stop herself from falling. The image of my mom falling backwards with her arms out was disturbing but the mail and everything that was piled on the bar falling around her was more so. It was also another reason for Dad to complain, the mess.

"You are so worthless. Look at this mess. What were you thinking?" She could do nothing right, not clean cook or take care of the kids, of him, the house, the checkbook. The list would go on and on. The words finally started to take on a distorted sound. They were so common to my ears that I would at one point stop hearing the words and just the tone was left.

I was not hearing anything but trying to block all out and just hold my brothers when I heard another thump against the other door. The kitchen was separated from the entry area by a door, and another door would lead you to outside the house. It was a full body hitting the door and it was a new kind of sound. It was followed by screams and a growl and more unfamiliar sounds that had me pausing and speculating.

"God damn it what are you doing?" Dad's voice cursing spoke volumes. I stopped speculating when I heard him followed by the door slamming closed.

Dad was more than the normal mad. He was a not usually a curser and the door being opened at all was remarkable. He having to close it though was not good. I knew that this had started heading from bad to the worst that it could. I had to leave the boys and venture down the stairs. I was the oldest and I was Mom's daughter, her ally.

"I've got to go down there," I almost whispered it. I tried to sound stronger as I said, "You boys have got to stay here. I don't want you two to move, just wait." There was no time for thought but action.

Michael didn't want me to leave. "It's not safe for you to go alone."

"I'll be careful. You just stay here and wait for me to come back. I need to know that you guys are safe."

"But it's not safe for you to go alone. I'll go with you." Michael was six years younger than me but he was a boy and he thought that it was his job to protect the girls no matter his age. This was in my opinion; thanks to T.V. and those turtles, they could encourage the boys to act peculiar.

"I'll be fine. But I got to go now. You need to wait here." I was starting to panic. Mom needed someone on her side.

I pulled back the sheets and exposed the refuge to the lights of reality that came up as I climbed out. I ran down the stairs wishing that they would stay back behind the sheet, wishing that the sheet had fallen back, that they could just stay with each other. I heard the outside screen door's metal bend and I thought no more of the boys, but of Mom.

Mom had been with Dad for years. He may have saved me from my first dad when he adopted me so the bastard couldn't see me anymore, but at this price I sometimes wondered if it was worth it. The fights had been getting worse for so many years that even she with all her innocence knew this but would still not admit it. By the time I had reached the bottom of the stairs, I was panicked. Mom's car door had slammed shut. I opened the door to the downstairs unsure of what I would find. It was not as bad as I had feared. The desk for Michael to do his homework for when he started school had been flipped onto its side; he didn't start school for another year, I was not allowed to use it, I was too big. The desk didn't bother me at all. The bar stools had been pushed back into the wall and the red and yellow faded tops of them blended into a dirty orange as I ran past them. Dad's voice had hit a dangerous octave of curses. The mail was in fact all over the floor, some had even made it into the entry room. There was broken glass; pieces were from the counter to the entry stairs. I almost tripped over the stair down into the entry room trying to avoid everything, going from one room to another.

Dad was banging his fist against the driver side of the car while using his other to hold onto it. Mom's screeches were now the ones at a dangerous level. The screeches were not of her being dangerous but that she was in danger. I reached the screen door and could no more than look. The door itself was bent from my waist at the handle, up to the top by the hinge. The metal had cracked the paint off giving a distinguishable look, and the screen had come out.

The little gray car was trying to move forward. It was if it had made it to the stop sign and didn't want to move any father. The chugging of starting and stopping was confusing. It had made the left turn and was maybe a house lengths distance from the stop sign. Mom was a blur trying to move back and drive while also reaching out trying to claw at him. The discord of her actions did nothing for her. He had managed to grab a chunk of her hair and had started to pull.

Then I heard something that will be remembered clearly for years. A neighbor came to their door; she had on her white floor length nightgown and her hair up in a bun, and she yelled out, "Cut out all that noise." I could tell that she saw Mom and Dad. She was looking right at them, two houses away from them. For hours after I would wonder when the cops were to show up. But the neighbor never called them. The cops never came. I should have known. She was always so rude to me when I would try to sell her things that the school had given us. It didn't matter if it was candles, cookies, candy bars or anything else she wasn't buying from us. Her granddaughter was always selling the same thing and she was going to buy from her. I doubted for years that she even had a daughter let alone a granddaughter.

Mom was screaming as she was being pulled through the car window. Dad looked back at me and it was then that I realized that I to was screaming. I don't remember walking out to the edge of the driveway. His arm had these long slender red marks from mom's clawing but she had been pulled out enough that I could see streams of blood from her head, her arm. Her hair normally a dry but neat blonde had a look of having been caught in a blender, mixed in tangles of blood. The scene was shocking. As Dad looked at me, he continued to hold onto Mom, pulling on her hair as she still struggled.

"Go! Right now," he yelled at me to go back inside.

I was worried of what he might do, but I still didn't want to leave. Mom just looked as if she had been caught in the headlights like some poor animal at the mercy of a larger predator. The total sense of helplessness was overwhelming. He had pulled Mom out of the car and was dragging her across the yard. I knew that I should listen to him but to leave Mom didn't feel right still. She was still crying and the total helplessness of everything was overwhelming.

"I'll come back, just let go." She was barely whispering. I thought that Mom must have felt my confusion. She had stopped struggling.

He turned from her direction to mine. She grimaced as he jerked her hair again. She repeated that she would come back inside.

"Don't do anything stupid," he replied.

I noticed that even as he let her stand to walk on her own from the driveway that he did not really let go of her hair. I turned and ran for the door before he had a chance to do more than open his mouth. I bumped right into the boys. They had not listened. Actually, Michael had not listened and had dragged Andrew with him.

I was upset for them to have come down and seen. Then I realized that Mom had not stopped struggling for me but for the

boys. Dad had not stopped because I had interfered but because of the boys. These boys had brought so much change into the family. With them I got my dream home, but also came the nightmares. These boys had everything now that I used to have. They were given new things from toys to clothes. They were given the attention first when something happened; they were so young it wasn't as if they really cared about what Mom got at the store or if Dad had done something fanatical. I pushed at them and we started our trek back into the home that was filled with contradictions.

It took us as long as we could make it last. I wanted to hear what was happening. We had three doors to go through before we would be on the stairs that would take us upstairs and leave Mom downstairs. Mom's moans of pain were barely audible over Dad's rants. We went through the first door: the screen door that led from the outside to the entry.

"This is all your own fault. You are just worthless. You should just die. Why don't you kill yourself and get it over with?" his voice was no longer shouting, but it was deathly calm. He would continue for what would feel like forever. We could fall asleep listening to him. He hated it when she made him do this. If she would just pay attention and do as he said. If she didn't run from him, he didn't like chasing her. She was not being fair to him, making him act this way. Did she think that he liked doing this? The things that came out of his mouth were so stupid, even to me. If we did something it was our fault no one else's but with him it was always her fault. He didn't act this way because he wanted to, she made him do it. They were still outside; we were just going through the second door: the entry room to the kitchen, the heart of a home I hear.

They had made it into the house. He saw that we were not upstairs yet and he yelled at us to hurry it up. "Now, go!"

Once on the stairs I hurried up them to get to the vent. Dad shut the door behind us. "If I see any of you kids looking down here and not in your own beds, I'll be up there when I am done."

I was not ready to test my own luck anymore. The boys had not moved from where they were stopped at the top of the stairs. They did not move past me from where I had fallen to my hands and knees to look down through the squares. I stood up and closed the vent. I grabbed a hand from each and we walked to the refuge. The idea of sleep was ludicrous but my body felt so drained from all the drama that had consumed my day, my night.

After each boy had climbed in the bottom bed they made room for me in the middle. It was my assigned spot in their life. I crawled in and put my back against the wall. One on each side and we didn't speak. I just held their heads and hands and made nonsense humming. No more words were wanted. It was time for the day to end but there were still the words that would drift up. Mom's cries were still being torn from her body. Tomorrow she would be calm and tell us how she had made it worse, that it wasn't that bad but she hadn't handled it right. She had let it go too far. She would say anything that she thought would make it better, would make it sound like she could help it from happening again. This time there were no words that she could put together that would make that ever seem possible. It would still be years before she would leave for good.

My dreams from this moment on changed. Gone were the simple hopes that my Mom and us could go and start a new life. They were no more, now they were of Dad dying. There was no other way to escape him. Sometime he would die after the police would finally come and he would resist arrest and they would have to "take him down." The gun shot would allow him to speak, so his last words were words of regret. Or maybe sometime he could go out in his precious boat and there would be a gas leak that would cause an explosion. Burning alive, he would not be able to get away to the water, seeing but not able to help himself: the helplessness. Finally, there were the dreams in which Dad would go too far and Mom would finally kill him, with a knife usually. Stabbing him in the gut and he would die slowly gurgling words that could not form, a look of shock upon his face. These dreams scared me because I didn't know what would happen to Mom, or to us. If a neighbor would speak up and say "yes, he did abuse her." Or, if she would go to jail and then I would be alone with the boys. I knew that she would be blamed even if she never would have. I felt that if these were to happen that I would have caused them. That was scary in itself. I missed the simple dreams of starting a new life simply away from Dad.