

The Last Encounter

“It was a pleasure.” Those were the last words that I said to my father. There was so much finality in that sentence, but I could not even tell you why I said it, or what I meant by it. I just needed to see if he would stop us, his children, his blood, from walking out on him. Who knows where I would be today if he would have said, “Stop, don’t go!” Or even if he just continued the argument to make me stay. He didn’t. He sat there and watched us leave, not saying anything. Loyalty is the biggest aspect of my belief system, my most valued personality trait. So imagine how I felt when I walked out on my father forever. I realize that this makes my brother, Mattmatt, and I seem like horrible children, wanting to slam the door in our father’s face, but we were fed up with being treated as second-class citizens in the social hierarchy that was our father’s family. We were leaving not because we were bad kids, but because we discovered that our father betrayed our family long before my siblings and I were able to figure out what family even meant. And as Arthur Miller once said, “Betrayal is the only truth that sticks” (goodreads.com/quotes).

The air outside my father’s house on that late February night was bitter cold, but it was so refreshing on my lungs as I breathed in newfound freedom. The house behind us was a fierce inferno of activity and emotion after the argument, the windows barely able to hold the blaze. My brother and I were finally liberated from all of it once we set foot into the winter air. A bystander could have said that my brother and I looked like garbage men, sloshing our shoes down the driveway and through the snow and hoisting our black, clothes-filled garbage bags over our shoulders. I did not look back at the house once as I chucked my belongings into my car, slamming the trunk door with a *thud*, echoing through the empty suburban night. After

starting the car, I looked to my right and locked on to my brother's crystal-blue eyes shining from the faint glow of the center console. The dim, sickly-yellow light casted shadows across our faces, making us appear older and more mature than we were supposed to be as high-schoolers. Apart from the weary and tired eyes, we found ourselves smiling. Our smiles in that moment were not the kind that are found very often. They weren't the kind of smiles seen on christmas cards or in school pictures. They were the smiles that students give their friends after a difficult exam, or ones that parents give to each other after putting their baby to sleep. It's the smile after a hard-fought battle, the ones that end with an unexpected victory. I backed out of the driveway feeling weightless. We started driving away, neither one of us looking back.

Turning out of that dreary, darkened subdivision for the last time, Mattmatt and I began to holler with joy. I had never felt this lightness before. My little brother, who I was supposed to protect all of these years, would finally be able to live without having to be afraid of family. Knowing that he would be happy allowed me some peace. I rolled down the windows to let the interior of the car feel more alive. Everything around me was intensified. My air freshener wafted delicious hints of pumpkin and marshmallow and mixed with the crisp night wind to create an aromatic bouquet. The wind danced through my hair and whispered praises in my ears for being so brave while I continued to smile. With the windows open I expected to be somewhat cold, but my emotions filled me to the brim, keeping me warm. However, even with my heightened senses I wasn't able to feel everything. I couldn't help but feel that something was missing, something inexplicable, but I chalked it up to the fight or flight reflexes causing me to forget. My brother and I were both screaming nonsense at each other, not really listening to what the other had to say, just living in the moment together.

“I can’t believe we just did that!” Matthew exclaimed.

“Oh my God what the hell just happened!” I laughed hysterically.

“I’ve wanted to say that for so long!” This went on and on until eventually the adrenaline began to wear off. With that, our elatedness faded, and our shouting diminished, until there was only the eerie scratching of tires rolling over salted roads, and nothing more.

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Returning to my mom’s house was strange, like I was entering a home that wasn’t mine. We had left her house only an hour ago, but it felt like a lifetime. My brother and I still had not spoken since the car ride. We couldn’t find any words to speak. I think that it was the thought of having a stationary home that rattled us. For as long as I can remember I’ve always been on the move, living a nomadic lifestyle and fighting to maintain one set of morals between two households, having only my little brother and my older sister as constants.

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Later that night I was in bed, ready to fall asleep and put the day behind me, but I found my mind racing too fast. I was too busy thinking of the conversation I had with my mom after I got back from my dad’s house.

“I love you, Michael.” My mother’s words soothed and cooled the surface of the volcanic activity of my feelings, but did nothing to stop the bubbling anxiety that was beneath the hardened crust. She understood why we left. She knew that sooner or later we would be angry at all of the things our father hid from us, all of the lies and deceitful things that he said right to our faces. How he cheated on my mother with my step-mother and left just weeks after my little brother was born, telling us it was our mom who wanted the divorce. I was living a real-life

disney fairytale, complete with a wicked stepmother. She was quick-tempered, angry, and made my siblings and I insecure of our talents to make her own children feel superior to us. His second wife was never really a charmer. My father turned a blind eye to all of it, of course, devoting his attention to his children he had with my stepmother.

I thought of all of the times when I could trust him, the times where I could tell him anything and he would be sincere and honest. Hell, there were even times when I confided in my stepmother. They were the first people that I told when I realized I was gay. I still remember when I stuttered out my confession. They said they were “so proud of me” and that I had nothing to be ashamed of. I looked up to them. I thought they were amazing.

And then a few years later I found the divorce papers. It was an accident, really. I was rifling through some bins in the basement, looking for some baby pictures, when I came across them. There, in bold text, was evidence stating my father was not the man I thought him to be. It’s difficult to remember that I once loved them unconditionally, and it’s hard to tell if they loved me at all or if it was all an act. Finding out that they broke my family crushed me, and I started to see how they treated me and siblings differently. However, no matter how many times they broke me down, I put myself right back together, convincing myself that it would get better.

And I was right. It was going to get better. My mom was proud of my brother and I that we were able to stand up to him after all of the years of him trying to push us off our feet.

“Then why do I still feel like shit?” I thought to myself. I was able to hold my own against my father and help my brother. I had courage, and when it faltered I was able to count on my brother, my greatest ally, to cover my weak spots. It shouldn’t be this hard to detest someone who has wronged my brother and I so many times. The only problem was that I still loved my

father, and I realized how much it hurt to still love someone who has given me every reason to hate him.

I tossed and turned, trying to get rid of the pins and needles that were making their way up and down my limbs. Invisible little monsters pestered me under the covers, poking and biting me with their claws and fangs, convincing me to stay awake and replay the night over and over and over in my head. Each replay more memorable than the last. It still felt surreal to me, that I had turned my back on him. I didn't even look back once to say goodbye. I betrayed him, and betrayed myself too by throwing my values out the window. Maybe it was how fast I gave up on the idea of forgiveness, or the realization that I would never see him as my father, if I ever would see him, again. There were just too many questions, too many thoughts, too much of everything.

I turned over to stare into my baby blue ceiling that was darkened by the night. It could have resembled the night sky, with the splattering of white dots from the base layer of paint peeking through, mimicking the constellations. Looking past my heavy thoughts of the present and looking to the future, I was weightless. I was infinitely light. No longer would there be a constant negative presence in my life, a person always there to tell me that I wasn't good enough. That was all over. I was traveling farther and farther into my imaginary night sky, not wanting to ever come back. Unfortunately, I knew that I would have to come back to my flightless life, but for now I was able to enjoy the sensation of soaring.

Turning away from my night sky, I gazed out my window again. It was silly that I found joy in such a horrible situation, and sorrow in a blissful one. I don't know how it was possible, but I was constricted and ethereal by the loss of family. I realized my weightlessness was because of the gaping hole in my heart. Arthur Miller was right, "Betrayal is the only truth that

sticks,” and that really sucks. All of the smiles I did have with my father were gone, leaving me with nothing but a feeling of emptiness.

The only thing I am able to remember about my father now is this night, the night of anger, the night of shouting, the night of strained, half-assed goodbyes. It’s unfortunate, but it’s the past now. Everyday is one more day to recover, to forget, to accept my reality. Telling myself to make peace with my inner demons some other time, I closed my eyes, with my last thoughts being how inexplicable it is to be soaring and chained down at the same time.