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A Mother's Child

A memoir in 1503 words

There was no bittersweet celebration on the day that I left home. No drawn-out hugs and no happy tears. I don't think either of us realized that I may not be back — that this seemingly temporary situation may be permanent. We were both preoccupied by the stress of moving day. Both of us wrapped up in the moment; a tendency we share. How would we transport my stuff? Would my bed fit into my narrow new room? Did I have everything I would need to be alone for the first time in my life?

I had imagined moving out to comprise of several cardboard boxes neatly packed in a clean room which would be my blank canvas. But I've never been more wrong. When my move-in was complete, I was left with a naked bed and clothes hangers of shirts draped over random half-packed boxes.

Sometimes when I think of my parents, I think of which one I am more alike. Maybe this is because, on the surface, I don't look like the biological child of either of them so I look for other ways to prove my relatedness. Regardless of the reason, nothing good has come from this comparison. When your parents are separated, answering a question like this feels like making a defining life choice; like picking sides.

I wanted to be like my dad when I was younger. He had always been the cool parent; from giving me my first cellphone, to signing me up for my first Facebook account. When I went to his place on the weekends, I never had to do school homework or read books like my mom wanted me to do during the weekdays. He drove my friends and I wherever we wanted to go in his bumper-stickered hatchback, telling us hilarious stories as a hula girl figurine danced on the dashboard. My friends thought I was lucky to have such a cool dad, and I felt lucky that they thought that.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my mom had a different point of view. She saw my cool dad miss child support payments and sign up her ten year old daughter for Facebook without her approval. My mother was the responsible parent; the one who gave up sugary foods and ate more beef while pregnant with me, despite loving chocolate and disliking red meat.

My values changed as I got older and I began to realize who the dependable parent was. I discovered that my cool dad could only be so reliable and I had started to crave trust and responsibility, rather than recklessness and spontaneity. My mom provided me with the former, yet still, for some reason I never strived to be like her.

My mom is the youngest of two. The eldest, her sister, was given more privilege and leadership opportunities in her family, which meant that my mom mastered independence and self-reliance early on in life. On the other hand, being the youngest of three within my dad's family meant that he was pampered as a child. It's strange to see how different my aunt and uncle turned out to be in comparison to him. My father's siblings seem to have soaked up the responsibility that never managed to trickle down to him. I guess some people never grow up.

Maybe that's why I never wanted to be like my mom; I wanted to be a child, I didn't want to be responsible like I had to be with my dad.

My aunt tells me that I have my mom's hands: slim fingers and wide nail beds with wrinkles on our bony knuckles. When I'm talking and can't get the words out, my hands gesture the sensory details that I can't explain. And even when I can articulate myself, my hands dance around to enhance the technicalities. When I catch my reflection mid-conversation, hands flailing, I see my mother.

My mother's hands are ones that smell of fresh garlic. They are the hands of a woman who swears by garlic as a natural remedy for keeping away the seasonal cold and flu. If I look the least bit unwell, she worries that I haven't been seasoning my every meal with raw, pressed garlic — and she's probably right. I was very good at ignoring her advice if it required me to go the slightest bit out of my way to follow.

I remember feeling relieved at the prospective idea of moving out. The only responsibility I would have was to myself; my mom would no longer be on my case for leaving unwashed dishes in the sink, or for not taking my omega-3 pills. I wouldn't keep her from sleeping early on a work night anymore when I was still out on the town with friends.

My home dynamic changed as I got older and at some point in time my mother became a nagging roommate to me. We had stopped getting along like we used to; back when it was her and I against the world. Our conversations became filled with details of me failing to fulfill my responsibilities, rather than plans we had made to travel the world.

It's mid September. Everyone is settled in and back to school — and so are the germs. My roommate lets out an enormous groan as her bedroom door swings open abruptly.

“I think I'm getting sick,” she says. There are noticeable bags under her deep-set eyes and her voice sounds huskier than usual.

“You know what you need? Garlic.”

“Really?” My roommate is intrigued.

I tell her nearly word for word what my mom would recite to me each time she pleaded with me to eat more garlic. *If only my mom could see me now.*

I learned quickly that living alone wouldn't be as harmonious as I had previously assumed beforehand. The main problem is that I'm not actually living alone; I share space with three other roommates in an awkwardly transformed garage-turned-laneway-home house. Many of the tiny rooms have strange slanted walls which greatly decrease the functional capacity of the space. Even weirder, there are doors that either go to the same place as other doors, or don't go anywhere at all. Strange noises — a can being opened, an alarm-clock ringing — have been heard from one of the locked doors which has led us to believe that our landlord has rented out the garage attached to our house to someone without telling us.

I had dreamed of moving to my own place that I would make my sanctuary — aesthetically pleasing and hassle-free. But now that I'm out, I'm faced with unusual obstacles I had never dreamed of encountering and I'm consumed by feelings that this isn't my space either. I yearn for a home, and maybe home isn't just a place.

I'm standing in my cold, cramped kitchen. I don't even know where to start; the sink is overflowing with dishes and ramen noodle particles are clogging the drainage of food-ridden "water" — if you could even call it that, considering how long it's been marinating. The worst part is that none of this mess is mine. When I moved in, I had purposefully got into the habit of washing my dishes after cooking to avoid creating a disarray that I would likely forget to come back and clean. I appeared to be the only member of the household that employed this strategy.

I take a crown of broccoli, a bundle of carrots, and a chicken breast out of the fridge once I've tidied up the kitchen. The latest — and probably best — revelation I've had is that chicken doesn't always have to taste like chewing on a chunk of rubber. My mom taught me to cook my poultry for as long as I could without burning it to confirm that there would be no traces of salmonella or other lethal bacteria. In hindsight, Gordon Ramsay would have absolutely yelled at us for overcooking our chicken meat if we were on Kitchen Nightmares.

My ingredients for a basic student dinner are prepped and nearly ready to be cooked. Last, but definitely not least, I begin to peel the garlic. The flakey skin of the cloves stick to my fingers and I know they won't be the only thing that will linger. With each piece of shell that comes off, I begin to smell more of the pungent, yet familiar odor. I know my fingers will reek of garlic at least until tomorrow no matter how many times I scrub my hands.

There was no bittersweet celebration on the day that I left home, instead, everyday that I'm away from home is bittersweet. I cling to the idea that maybe one day I'll be back. My mom would be proud; I wash my dishes after every meal, season my food with garlic, and take my

salmon oil supplement every day. I am my mother's child and I take her with me everywhere I go.