

Things Left Unsaid

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It's November 2017. I am home for the first time since I left for college. I am watching *Atomic Blonde* with my mother. I see her physically recoil at the scene where two women kiss. Ew, she says. Ouch, I think. I can tell that she wasn't expecting this scene in an action movie. Her visible discomfort makes me want to shrink and disappear into the couch. My toes curl tightly, my fists ball up, but otherwise I do not move until the scene is over. I want to pause the movie and tell my mother that her reaction was hurtful. I want to be able to raise my voice and tell her this without running the risk of being disowned, and I want to tell her that my first semester at college was a time of self-discovery and self-acceptance and a time of healing from the trauma she caused when she weaponized her religion and that I dreaded coming home and that this is part of the reason why. But I don't. I say nothing. The movie keeps playing, and I swallow the urge to cry.

It's December 2018. I am home from the worst semester I've had so far. My sister is doing her makeup in the bathroom mirror. I'm tired, still drained from keeping myself from jumping off a building a few weeks ago. She is awake, excited for a first date with a boy. I ask her where she's going. The movies, she says. I ask her how she's getting there. He's picking me up, she tells me. I don't ask any more questions. I want to stop her from going. She has our parents' permission, but I don't like the idea of her being alone with a boy I've never met. I was sexually assaulted 5 months ago. I never told her what happened—I didn't tell anyone in my family—but I almost wish I had. If I had, I would have told her to be careful. I would have told her that sometimes it's the nicest guys who cause the most harm, that she could text me if at any point he pressured her to do something she didn't want to do, that I just wanted to protect her at all costs in a way that I wish someone had protected me, that the idea of her coming home and never telling me if something happened—the thought of her not telling anyone if something happened—scares me to no end. But I don't say any of that. Have fun, I say. She nods. She walks out the door and I continue pretending that I am okay.

It's July 2019. I am home for only two days. I've been abroad for most of the summer, heading back to Nashville after a quick stop at home. I take my brother out for ice cream, just the two of us. He's 11. We drive to his favorite place across town. The car ride is too quiet. I've been away for too long for either of us to remember how we used to fill the silence. He starts warming up to me again when I tell him I like going on adventures with him. We sit outside. I've missed the Florida sun, and I like the way the heat settles over me. I ask him how he's been. Good, he says. I ask him how it feels to almost be in middle school. Feels the same, he says. I ask him if he'll miss me when I leave again. He pauses. Eh, he says. I ask him what "Eh" means and he says he's used to me being gone so he doesn't really miss me anymore. The words feel like a gut punch. I want to tell him that I wish I could come home more often. I want to tell him that every time I come home I have to hide entire pieces of my identity because our mother would have a heart attack if she knew about the girl I'm seeing and that I don't know how to tell our father that I have bipolar disorder because I know our mother's own mental illness is already a weight he

carries on his shoulders and coming home means pretending to be someone I am not. But I don't say anything. He's too young to get it. Oh, I say. Well, I'll miss you. Yeah, he says. I know. We return to silence. We eat our ice cream and melt in the sun.

It's October 2019. I am home for four days. I see my father in the kitchen, and it makes me want to cry. I peek around the corner so that he won't see me, and I just watch. He looks so happy cooking dinner. He plays salsa music as he cooks, stepping and seasoning in rhythm. A tear falls down my cheek. He stirs a pot with a wooden spoon, dull clangs like cowbells. The food he's cooking smells like home. He's cooking Colombian food that you just can't find at a dining hall at school, food that jerks me back into memories of a time when I was a kid and my mother was never home from work in time to eat dinner with us. My heart aches. I want to let myself cry in defiance of my resolve to hide my emotions while I'm home. I want to step out into the light and go up to my father and interrupt his cooking and break down in his arms and truly cry in a way I have not let myself before and tell him I love him and hear him tell me he loves me too in a show of affection we have never shared. But I don't. He's still somewhat of a stranger to me. We share the kind of unspoken love that is sometimes best left alone to grow in the dark. I stay hidden. He keeps cooking. I go back to my room, shut the door quietly, and return to numbness.

It's December 2019. I am home from college for the first extended period of time in 11 months: two weeks. It feels like an eternity. It's Christmas Eve. My parents, siblings, and I are at my grandmother's house, the five of us spread out among the other friends and family members invited to the party. If there's distance between my parents and me, there are oceans between me and these strangers who double as relatives. I take a seat in the living room as my grandmother begins the prayers. The room is dripping with Catholicism. She begins to speak and the words flow out in a monotone grace. It's beautiful, the way the prayers mold to fit her mouth, the way the words grow to be much bigger than she is, electrified by her belief. I want to join her and provide a harmony to her melodic drone, the two of us in a synchronized call and response. I want to believe in the God she is praying to. I want to ask her to teach me how to pray and tell her that what I'd ask for is acceptance of who I really am and I want to tell her that I'm tired of hiding and that the tactic of trying to pray the gay away does nothing but hurt me in ways that she cannot imagine. But I don't. There's no point. She will not change her ways and I will not change mine. I just watch, listen, and ask myself why I keep coming home.

It's February 2020. I begin writing this essay from the comfort of the home I've made for myself at Vanderbilt. I am crying every time I write another paragraph, every time I plunge myself into the pool of memories I sometimes wish I didn't have. I wish I could go back to a time when things were simpler, but even then, I'm not sure if things were ever really that simple. I think back to high school and remember when my bipolar disorder ran rampant, unmedicated and out of control. I think back to middle school, back to that time of chaos and confusion, a time when I first started feeling things I'd never felt before, professing my love to a girl, and hearing her say I love you, too. I think back to times of addiction, of all the drugs and drinks that entered my system in attempts to quell the aches of mental illness, confusion, and chaos. I both do and do not want to remember these things anymore. The pain will make for a bestseller one day, I'm sure, but looking back too often makes it tough to look forward. I wish I could show my parents my writing. Maybe then they'd understand. I wish I could call them and ask for their unconditional love and hear them say I have it and ask them to come visit sometime and show

them the place where I feel most at home, show them the friends who feel most like family. But I won't. I stop typing and go back to finding happiness on my own.

It's March 2020. I lose my definition of home. I am outside smoking a cigarette I've stopped telling myself is my last. The air is cold and I am wearing a sweatshirt that will be put away in a closet when I go back to Florida. A pandemic of all things has knocked the wind out of me and robbed me of security. I want to tell a virus, of all things, that I do not want to leave the people that take the weight of my past and my present off my shoulders when it becomes too heavy for me to carry on my own. I want to yell until I lose my voice and lose my ability to explain to a virus of all things that it hurts to go back to a place where silence burns my throat and covers the secrets that lie in too many things left unsaid. But I don't, because I can't. A virus of all things does not care about my secrets and the people I keep them from. I put out my cigarette, let the smoke slip out of my lungs, and let the tears falling down my face wash away all the words I've left unspoken.