

By Erica M. Hayden

My siblings taught me an important rule of survival from a young age: if you have a chance to be out of the house, go.

I didn't realize what they meant at the time. As I grew older, I started to understand their burning desire to leave. The simple question of when anyone would be home leaves me with uncertain dread, lingering closely behind is the overwhelming sense of silence in the house.

The TV in the background is drowned out by the intense murmur of my heart, the beating quickly pattering and increasing in speed the more I try to calm myself. Panic, one clammy hand on my chest as the other rests on my left ear; now noticing the mocking rhythm of my eardrums intensifying. I begin to shudder as I'm left to steady my own shallow breath, the thought of passing out tenses my body's movements. After what felt like an eternity to regain control over my body, I'm left with the same unfilled gaping void that I feel deep in my chest. Ever so slowly consuming, until all I'm left to feel is nothing.

I can't recall a lot of my childhood. The moments I do recall seem wasteful; as if the memories that come clear to me could have been replaced. Stored for an even greater memory, meaningful even. I will say, I hold no grudge or malice towards my siblings. My eldest sister Lisa and my older brother Louis were there for me, far more than I remember our mother being there. Whether Lisa was cooking a meal for me, or Louis was explaining his game, I watched upon his request to keep him company. The little things they did for me really stuck with me, even as a grown woman.

However, as we grew older and became our own people with our own lives, the relationship between all my siblings and I has since become strained. I don't blame any of them, or myself for that matter. Growing up in that house, it felt like walking on eggshells. One wrong move and you've practically signed off on the repercussions to come, to the point where I subconsciously made my own rules to follow. Don't speak unless spoken to, watch your tone, be careful about what you say, never pick sides, devil's advocate, etc.

I was a child; I shouldn't have felt the need to incorporate such "rules."

These rules were mainly made to protect my sanity from my mother and my second eldest sister [Josie]. Josie was the sibling I feared to be home; she was hard to read, and hard to please. If I caught her on a good day, it was the biggest relief I ever felt, as if I was peacefully floating in the sea- inviting the waves to kiss my skin. However, one wrong move and that calm wave would match the terror of a tsunami that would gladly crash down on me.

Josie's emotions would go from zero to one hundred fairly quickly. If you were to blink, one would completely miss why or how she had gotten so angry. She would pierce the very depths of one's fears or insecurities and exploit that as ammo for the screaming match she started, and would finish.

As for my mother, her emotions were similar to Josie's. Making the drastic jump from kind to hostile, however, definitely not as cruel. I was never accustomed to my mother being home, I have flashes of when I would see her for a splitting second. Either waiting for the bus for school as she was driving to work, or when I came home, and she was heading off somewhere.

I recall the feeling of uneasiness when she would touch me or converse with me. I'd stiffen in my place when she went to hug me, closing my eyes as tightly, the muscle strain too forcible, causing my eyes to twitch in darkness as they remained closed. Waiting for her foreign touch to graze me and be done with, the chills spreading to the point of contact throughout my body. The

breath I unknowingly held within my lungs shrivels in sync with the nauseating feeling swirling in my stomach.

After I moved in with my father in high school, Josie and my mother reached out more, trying to make more of an effort to be in my life, as they wanted me to be more a part of theirs. However, I couldn't spare the time they wanted. I was growing into a life I was creating for myself. I was working part-time, I had been in seven clubs, I was in school, and on top of it. I still wanted to have a social life. The life I created further progressed to the present time in college.

I still love and care for Lisa and Louis. I regret that we don't talk or see each other as often as we used to, and that's saying a lot, considering how our lives at home used to be. However, anytime we do contact each other or meet at family events, I reminisce over our childhood, and every time, I'm overfilled with nostalgic joy and appreciation towards them.

Today I can wholeheartedly say I view my mother and Josie in a different light. Josie has since managed her temper. She will still have quick bursts of malice when pushed to the edge, although, she is quick to apologize. We have since been talking more often and coordinating when we are both free to see each other again.

As for my mother, we will text and call now and then. I will also text her when I'm home so we can see one another. Whether that be for me to work with her, go grocery shopping for my dorm, watch soap operas together, etc.

I have to say, it's strange to now be doing what I always wished for as a child. The warm presence of my mother, the big/little sister relationship with Josie. Granted, at times, our horns will lock. Whether it's because the demand from my mother to be home more than in Chicago while I'm at school finally gets to me or Josie poking into my business that starts a pointless battle. It's difficult to reform the strained relationships we once had, but it's even harder to try and maintain those newly built relationships.

That being said, I welcome the change and growth that has been blossoming in our family. I can't say I can forget everything that's happened; the absence of my mother, the cruelty of Josie- but I have come to accept the past. That way, I can make more meaningful memories that I can hold onto.