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Attics and Other Failed Expectations

2010 was fifteen years ago, the year I started elementary school, a year I remember almost physically. Everything had a thin layer of grime, the way I remember it. Kindergarten settles in my memory like dirt in cracked sidewalks.

It was early October, I don't quite remember the day, but I think it was Saturday. We just got home from a trip and were beginning to decorate for my favorite holiday. It was unremarkable. My Dad and I had a lot of spooky decorations in the downstairs closet to dig through, and Mom was going to check the attic of the house we just moved out of for more. She probably picked out a matching halloween themed outfit for me and I watched as she hopped into her pretty black car that we sold a few years later.

Unexpectedly, Dad left suddenly. He left me alone after getting a phone call and sprinting to his car. Leaving a five year old by herself was very much something he wouldn't usually do. Nana, his mother, showed up at our house a few minutes later, her pristine car in our driveway. I loved when Nana would pick me up to go to the book store and (if I promised not to tell) Chili's. She was uncharacteristically short with me when I asked where Dad went, and told me to pack to stay overnight. We made the short drive to her house in silence punctuated by a scratched Andrea Bocelli CD.

Nana perched by the phone until the sun went down. I entertained myself for hours, keeping the volume down because she would shush me and start pacing. I pressed all of her embroidered handkerchiefs flat with my purple toy iron. I brushed her ratty Yorkie, Baxter, until he was sick of it. He was just a puppy then. I stood on my tippy toes and opened the sliding glass door to let us both out in her backyard. I ran back and forth across her garden, under the sweeping branches of the weeping willow. I have always loved that tree. Like many things that you love when you're five, my tree is long gone. I didn't speak to Nana until dinner. Nana's special pasta, just orzo and ricotta cheese, nothing special, but somehow I can never replicate it. We were quiet. Wasn't much she wanted to say. I spent the night in her guest room at the end of the hall, suffocated in frilly pink pillows.

I couldn't sleep without the stuffed animal I was bought as a baby. She is a blue blanket with a plush dog head sewed on, creatively named Blue Puppy. I gently tilted her head back and forth to shake the bell inside, trying to comfort myself. I couldn't sleep at all that night. I heard Nana mention Dad was at the hospital. I didn't hear her mention Mom. I never meant to eavesdrop so often as a kid, but I was quiet. People forgot I was there. And so I heard things I was never meant to hear.

I wondered if Mom had died and they all thought I wasn't ready to hear it yet. If she died, was I supposed to feel it? Was she with grandpa Jerry? Or was she there with me in the dark?

The next day I went to Grammie's house and it passed like the first. Grammie wasn't quite as parked at the landline as Nana was, but she was as sparse with the details. She wandered about the house quietly, feeding the animals and making me a cup of apple spiced tea in the microwave. I rolled around on the carpet with the cats and watched my VHS tapes in the spare room. Somebody had already taught me to rewind them. I loved watching the Lion King. Scar shoved Mufasa off a cliff and his son cried over his broken body. I wonder *how long will it be until that's me? Why don't they just get it over with?*

I wanted my Dad. He was gone a lot when I was little, on business trips and such. I was confused. If he loved me, where was he? I realized once I started school that he was also doing something important all day and that he was carving out as much time as he could for me. We went to lunch every Saturday. He would read me bedtime stories on the floor and let me sit on his back when he did pushups. I didn't see how hard he was trying to be fun, to be involved when I was little, but I did know he would protect me. Dad was tough, but he was warm. He was strong, he carried me upstairs when I fell asleep in the car. All I wanted those three days was for him to carry me home. To tell me the truth.

Grammie drove me to the hospital that night. It was dark and rainy, the kind of night where you get bad news. I jingled Blue Puppy again to focus on something else. I don't remember which hospital it was she dropped me off at but I remember the stupid yellow walls. I still hate that color, the light bounced off of it and made everyone look sick. A nurse took me to a door left ajar, where my Father waited somberly. Their voices faded into the background as I fixed my eyes on the spotty linoleum. I feared looking in. I knew they didn't keep dead people in

hospitals, they got buried. But they kept dying people there, like Grandpa, who got worse and worse until he just faded away. They were going to shuffle me in there and tell me that she'll be gone soon. To say goodbye.

And then I heard her voice.

Mom looked terrible. There were wires and patches and bruises just everywhere across her body. But her eyes were open, and she was calling for me. I ducked under the doctor's arm and spider-climbed into her bed, pressing my ear to her heart. She was real.

I don't remember what she said, but I don't think it was all too important besides "I'll be alright." The attic floor gave out under her at the other house and she hurt her spine. She tapped me on the nose with her finger, covered with some kind of glowy machine.

"It's my ET finger."

I didn't know what that meant, but she told me we could watch a movie together when we went home. She could leave soon!. I didn't know it at the time, but she was inches away from losing her ability to walk that sunny day. Feet away from being dead.

I don't think my grandmothers meant to keep things from me, but they did. And they continued to hide things from me for years. For my own good, supposedly. And finding out has continued to be devastating. I don't know if this was the first time I showed signs of my anxiety disorder, but it's the earliest I can remember. What I don't know can and does hurt me. I worry myself sick about things and seek information I may find distressing so I'm not caught off guard. Fear was

inevitable. The question was what I wanted to be afraid of. I'm managing better now. The world seems less hostile grown out of a child's eyes, but I still have my moments where I wish there were easy answers. Or that forgetting was still as easy as ringing a bell.