

Disconnected Spaces

By Liza Allen

After my mother died, our house became a collection of disconnected spaces. When one room was lit, the others were dark. The hallway that was a conduit between them had a ceiling light that was rarely turned on. Someone looking in from the outside might think our house was in perpetual darkness.

My mother was diagnosed with colon cancer a few months after I graduated from high school. Nine months later, her rounds of chemo were over. She had lost her balance, much of her weight, and all her hair. By late summer, she was on a steady dose of morphine.

My family knew we wouldn't find the drug, the treatment, the one thing that might cure her, so instead, we talked about how hot it was outside, how deep the water in the carport got when the drain clogged after a rain. We talked about how the Vienna bread at Woulett's bakery is always best when it's fresh and the cheese Danish are better than the fruit-filled ones. We all agreed that if you want good rye bread, it's best to go to Cecil's around 10 am when the loaves first come out of the oven. Filberts are good in November and blueberries are best in July. If you buy too many peaches, you can always cook them into compote, but half of it will eventually get thrown out. That summer, we talked to make time pass more quickly or to slow it down. We talked to avoid the silence that scared us. We talked to fill the empty spaces between us.

My family held a superstition around naming things that are scary and hard to talk about. You might bring the evil eye upon yourself or someone else if you said the thought you most feared out loud. If you mention a sickness—cancer or heart disease—an elder would immediately say “poo, poo, poo” and spit three times. This, we all believed, would ward off the evil eye. In my family's view, naming things was never good. It was better, in fact, to leave things unnamed, unspoken, hidden, so my mother's imminent death never got named. We never really acknowledged that she was dying, so we never said goodbye. Instead, we held her hands, brought her water, made her sandwiches, dialed the phone, helped her in and out of bed, opened and closed the shades.

My mother's funeral had been on a cold October afternoon. The biting wind and bright sun startled us when we stepped out of the car and onto the cemetery walkway. We shuffled through dry leaves. I felt the sting of cold air on my bare legs. My father pulled the collar of his wool coat up around his neck. It was the coat he wore for special occasions -- to high holiday services, to weddings, and to other people's funerals. From across the uneven lawn, the rectangular opening was hardly visible behind the mound of earth freshly moved that morning.

A sea of people was walking in front and behind us – men's heads covered in black yarmulkes, women in high heels and mink coats.

Although he hadn't slept all week, although he had spent the last eleven months dreading this day, my father moved through it with solemn grace. He placed his hand on top of mine as we walked. I didn't know it then, but this would be one of the last times that I would feel safe and protected with him. Soon he would freefall into grief and loneliness and sit for hours staring out the window of our living room, a shot glass on the end table, the tv on hum, his hair disheveled.

During the funeral, I thought about the routine things my parents had done together--grocery shopping each Wednesday evening at the Red Owl and changing the storm windows each September--my father would climb up and down a wooden ladder and hand the heavy windows to my mother who sprayed each one with a thin coating of Windex. They would spend the whole day moving the ladder a few feet at a time, from window to window, until finally by late afternoon they had circled the entire house.

My parents' only vacation was a weekend trip to the Wisconsin Dells. They took a scenic boat ride on the Wisconsin River and toured a limestone cave there. My mother bought a souvenir spice box at the hotel gift shop with "The Dells" written across the top.

My parents had been inseparable since 1946. At night, her breath near him kept him alive when he returned to that place in the darkness where no one could reach him. For most of my parents' marriage, the bedroom was a refuge--a place where my father could safely pour out his pain and my mother would patiently drink it in. At night, as they lay in the dark, the uncluttered room coaxed their hidden thoughts into the shared space. As a child, I'd listen at their bedroom door at night while they shared stories, remembering their childhood friends and Miechow, the town in Poland where they had lived as children before the War. Their bedroom was where they planned and imagined a future that was always an improvement over their present lives. The future was where there would be more money, more time, less exhaustion.

As a parent, my father had always braced himself against moments of potential catastrophe. He seemed convinced that every birthday party would end with a house fire or an outing near a lake would result in a drowning. His fears and frequent scolding to stay out of deep water and play close to home reminded me that he believed he alone had the power to save us, yet we all knew that he was powerless against the randomness of most misfortune.

Months after the funeral, signs of my mother were everywhere. My parents' clothes comingled in the closet they had shared for thirty years. When he opened a dresser drawer, he found her nightgowns still neatly folded near his V-neck tee shirts. In the bathroom, her toothbrush hung in the metal holder above the sink next to his as it always had.

Without her, my father became increasingly distraught and helpless. Some nights I would come home from school or work and he would be sitting in the dark with the television off, staring

at the floor. He often looked as though he'd traveled back in time and left a part of himself there.

That winter and spring, I lived at home with my father, intending to do this only until he was strong enough to be on his own. I secretly hoped he would see my impatience and let me go, but instead, he held on tighter. Like my father, I avoided most of the rooms in the house, spending most of my time either in classes, at the library, or my boyfriend's apartment. When I was away, I felt the distance between my father and me was an ocean—a body of water that neither of us had the skills to navigate across.

One Saturday morning in June, eight months after my mother's death, I left home with the newspaper and by noon, I had signed a lease on an apartment a few miles away.

That evening, when I walked into the house, my father was watching the evening news, so I sat in the chair next to him waiting for some opening. It never came, and so I blurted out:

“Pop, we need to talk.”

He didn't respond right away.

"A minute," he said, irritated that I interrupted him.

“Pop, it's important.”

Without looking at me, he asked, “So did Mr. Photographer ask you to marry him?”

“No, nothing like that, but I need to tell you something.”

“So talk. I'm listening." He shifted his body in his chair to look at me.

“Pop, I found an apartment. I'm moving out at the end of the month.” My voice sounded strange. My words fell into the room like foreign objects. For a moment, we both stared at them in disbelief.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“I'm moving, Pop.”

“Are you moving in with him?”

“No. I'm not. I want my own place.”

“You have a place here.”

“I know, but it's not the same.”

The late afternoon light entered the windows from odd angles and divided the room into uneven portions of light and shadow.

“Okay. It’s your choice. Do what you want.”

I stared at the floor, at my shoes, looked around the edges of the room, noticing how he had kept the carpet vacuumed. He stared outside, past the front lawn to the boulevard where joggers moved past us with a mechanical grace.

His expression was stern and I waited for it to turn explosive, but it never did.

“Are you hungry, Pop?” I finally asked.

“A little,” he said.

I was relieved that the conversation had gone better than I thought, but I still felt I was abandoning him.

In the kitchen, I grabbed a frozen bag of turkey soup from the freezer, heated a pan of water on the stove, and walked into my bedroom--still a kid’s room with stuffed animals on the bed.

I thought about the apartment I had rented that afternoon and imagined myself waking in the morning, making a big cup of coffee in the tiny kitchen, and sitting down to write in a favorite chair. My new apartment was in an industrial neighborhood in Minneapolis surrounded by grain elevators and railroad tracks. I had fanaticized about nights after work spent writing. I hoped that the apartment would inspire me to find my voice.

In reality, my life began to look more like my father’s life than the one I had imagined for myself. I dropped out of college and enrolled in a trade school. I worked hard as an electrician apprentice and was unhappy. Secretly, I hoped someone would rescue me, convince me that I had taken a wrong turn, had missed a great opportunity, and would help me turn my life around. Though I distanced myself from my father, I had also absorbed his disillusionment. If life was hard and disappointing, things were as they should be. I couldn't see another way.

After work, I came home and sat near a window in my living room that faced north and let in only indirect light. I can't recall a single sunny day for the two years I lived there. Like my father, I lit only one room at a time, spending most evenings looking through old photos of my parents searching for some clue as to who they were, so I'd have some idea about who I was becoming.

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