Room For Memories

 Standing by my car, I take a drag off my cigarette, blowing the smoke out through my nose. I wrestle with a box of my things and attempt to balance it on my knee, my right hand jingles my keys in the left pocket of my jeans as I listen to the autumn breeze caressing my tear-stricken face. Throwing the butt into the gravel beneath my feet, I twist my foot to extinguish the spark. I pace slowly towards the front door. My hand feels cool on the metal as I slowly turn the knob, kicking the uprooted “For Sale” leaning against the frame before entering my home for the last time.

**Age Six:**

 Running around the pool table away from my father, his footsteps are thunderous like the clouds outside, but I am not afraid. He catches me, muscular arms wrapped around my minute frame, and I laugh as he tickles me. His beard nuzzles my cheek; I smell the alcohol on his breath. It’s a familiar scent that stains the air around us. He puts me down on the table, showing me how to hold a pool stick. My fingers do not bend the way he wants, but I develop my own way of shooting. Making contact with the cue ball, the eight ball falls into a corner pocket. I jump up excitedly, yelling my accomplishments, as the stick smacks the white ceiling. I stop in my tracks, suddenly afraid of the booming voice rattling in my skull.

 “You can’t do anything right, can you? God, you’re such a fuck-up!” he starts, reaching for me furiously.

 I roll across the table, pool balls hitting my ribs and shins, and I drop to the ground. He is upon me, hand outstretched and ready to find its mark. The rain falls outside, hitting against the house; thunder claps once again, and now I am afraid. Scrambling to my feet, I scamper down the short corridor into the living room.

**Age Eight:**

 When I enter the living room, I am carrying my mother’s bowling towel because I insist on helping the team every Wednesday night; we have just arrived home.

I run up to my father, chest puffed out, and squeak, “Dad! We won tonight! I think it’s ‘cause I helped.”

The rancid smell of beer clouds my senses as I stare at the displeased scruffy face. His eyes do not flutter, but his mouth hangs agape; the sounds of slumber escape his cracked lips. A beer bottle rests between his legs, and I notice more lining the edge of the side table.

My mother sighs and says, “Let’s go to bed, dear. He must’ve worked really hard today,” and I understand that she is lying. Picking me up, she hugs me tight and turns towards the darkened hallway. I look in her eyes and see the loving shade of blue that I have always found comfort in. The tears fall silently onto my cheek as I bury my face in her neck, trying to return the love she supplies to me. She smiles timidly as she gathers my pajamas from the hall closet, and we change before going into my parents’ room to sleep, my father’s pillow no longer resting next to my mother’s on the mattress.

**Age 12:**

My mother and I are crying on the bed, as I try to comfort her after the death of my aunt Lynn, her older sister. I embrace her shaking body with my own, and we sob into one another’s shoulders, not knowing what else to do and hoping for an answer. Misty, the family dog, howls from outside as the sun descends to peek through the curtains, and I look up at the sky blue walls. There are no tissues within the confines of the room. I separate myself from the bed and walk into the hallway, faces in pictures smiling over my shoulder: a family picture with everyone dressed in dark orange colors to symbolize the beginning of fall, an expensive snapshot of my first ride on a rollercoaster with my father, my baby picture with a onesie that reads “Daddy’s little girl.” I resent them all.

The phone rings, and I turn around to peek my head back into the bedroom. I watch my mother slowly crawl across the empty bed, gripping at the sheets like a drowning victim trying to escape the inevitable. Eyes blurred from the hours of tears, the phone topples from the nightstand in a vain attempt to avoid spreading the news. She scoops the receiver up into her arms and shakily answers the call after taking note of the Caller ID.

“Lynn is gone,” she whispers to the other end, “Rox, how did this happen? How...did we lose our sister?”

I do not hear my aunt’s reply, but I imagine it to be something like, “I don’t know, Ang. I just don’t know.”

My mother’s words slowly devolve from coherent sentences to tear-stained blubbering within seconds, and I watch her body sink and fold into itself, the pain surpassing her strength. She collapses on the bed, wrapping her arms around the phone, and I can hear both women sobbing over the loss of their sister.

I feel the pressure building behind my eyes as I look down the hall for my father, but he is nowhere to be found as I duck into my room to grab tissues.

**Age 13:**

As I watch Futurama in my room on the bulky, busted television screen, my father screams from the living room. I hear the mostly one-sided conversation, “You’re the reason I drink! Because you’re such a bitch! You give money to everyone else, it’s no wonder we’re fucking broke. I don’t care if you leave. Take her and go to Rox’s, just fucking go!”

My mother tries to calm him down, “Stop yelling! She can hear you. She’s just in the other room…”

“I’ll fucking yell if I damn well please! This is my fucking house!”

I listen to things being hit and insults thrown around like a symphony of violence. I close my eyes and direct the song to the tune of shoving my clothes into a bag. Turning around I look up into the vanity mirror, attempting to grab the rest of my clothes. I see my mother’s same shade of blue contained in my own steely eyes. Hot tears fall between my movements as my mother comes to collect me. I finish packing by going to the wall and ripping off half of my hand-drawn family portrait. In the half I fold and place gently into my backpack, my mother and I play outside with Misty; my father stays on the wall of the house, artfully captured in his normal sleeping state, beer bottles at his feet. I turn the television set off and hoist the bag onto my shoulders. My mother takes my hand and leads me down the hallway, and I see the lumbering figure.

He looks not at me, but at the large television set in the corner of the living room. I notice a flash of camouflage cross the screen, and a man talks about the best way to track a dead animal’s body:

“They won’t get too far with the amount of pain they’re in, so all you need to do is follow the trail of blood.”

Visibly cringing, my mother stops and puts her free hand on my head, ruffling my knotted hair. I glance up at her, a grin on my face because of the physical contact. Her face is stricken with anger and dejection.

Looking around the living room, I see unwashed plates sitting on the table, bottles of beer strewn across the floor, and a substantial stain forming on the carpet in front of the armchair my father has claimed as his own. My mother does not say anything, but she hangs her head and sighs. I say goodbye to my father, but he does not respond, looking only at the deer’s corpse and at the bottom of a bottle. My mother drags me to the kitchen to grab her purse.

**Age 15:**

Standing in the kitchen I grew up in, I am helping my mother make supper. It’s Friday, so we make a pizza from scratch, like we always have, even before my father left. We sit down to eat at the table, and she asks me about school. I tell her my classes are going well. We talk about my grades, mostly A’s and a couple B’s. She is proud of me, I know it, but she doesn’t talk much. She is exhausted from work, as per usual, and by the end of the night, she is asleep, alone, while I stay up to do homework. Closing my Geometry book, I get out of my chair slowly and go to the refrigerator to pour myself a glass of Sunny D. I notice the bottle of vodka sitting on top of the cabinet, and I carefully remove it from its perch, just as I have for months. Mixing the two liquids, I drink the contents quickly; I am afraid of being caught, but not afraid enough to stop. I know it would disappoint her. I audibly sigh as I rinse the glass out, and I place my hands on the countertop. Head hung low, I glare at the reflective white surface, ashamed of what I have become.

I whisper to my reflection, “He was right all along, wasn’t he? I’m such a fuck-up.”

Moving sluggishly, I clean up the mess on the table and put everything back in order, my vision blurred. The clock reads 1:36 in the morning, and I decide it is time to go to bed. I enter the laundry room to change out of my clothes and grab my clean pajamas.

**Age 17:**

The smoke-filled laundry room seems to grow smaller and smaller with every passing second as I take another drag, a habit I started this year; I say to my mother as she folds laundry, “Mom, I have something…important to tell you.”

I try to exhale towards the ceiling so the clean clothes are not directly affected. She turns to me, after laying down a pair of folded underwear, and silently waits for the other shoe to drop as she lights up a cigarette as well.

“I—I’m gay…” I stutter, nervous to finally say it out loud. Her expression does not change, but her eyes soften as she pulls me into an embrace. She squeezes me like a vice, and my breath hitches in my throat. She rocks me back and forth, just like when I was young, and says, “It doesn’t matter who you fall in love with, be it guy or girl or something in between,” her voice quivering as she continues, “because you’ll always be my daughter, and I love you unconditionally. I’ll always be proud of you and accept you as you are.”

I stand bewildered at the simplicity of it all, my conservative Catholic mother just accepting this about me. The still burning cigarette I left in the ashtray distorts the atmosphere around us, and I am happy beyond words. I chuckle lightly, and my mother looks up at me, a puzzled expression on her face.

“I’m happy, Mom. I’m gay. Get it? Gay means happy,” I retort slowly, a grin spreading ear to ear.

She smiles at me, not just a regular smile, but one that reaches her eyes as well. This is the happiest I have seen her in months. She pulls me back in for another hug and laughs into my shoulder before breaking away to get one more look at me.

She takes my hand and says, “If you’re gay, I’m happy, got it?” punctuated with a wink and a tongue click, “Now, go clean the bathroom like you were supposed to do an hour ago.”

“Okay, Mom,” I smirk at her, “I got it.”

**Age 18:**

Staring into the smudged bathroom mirror, I am getting ready to finally leave.

“I can’t believe I’m going to college,” I state to no one in particular, punctuated with a sigh of exasperation.

“And I can’t believe you dyed your hair to match the damned bath towels,” my mother interjects.

I jump, startled by her unknown presence, and begin to chortle at the accuracy of her statement. I got into the school I wanted, I have the haircut and color I always dreamt of, and I am finally leaving my hometown, but it is a bittersweet ending. My mother knows it is difficult for me, so she comes up behind me to give me a hug. We both look into the mirror, still covered with steam on account of my recent shower, and I finally understand why I chose to dye my hair blue. Reflecting next to my own bright blue eyes are my mother’s, just the same. I wrap my arms around her torso and hold her until she feigns lack of oxygen.

She finally asks as she leaves the room, “Are you ready to go?”

“I think so,” I reply with a sigh.

“Remember,” my mother states, already down the hallway, “no matter what happens, I will always be here for you. Your home is with me and mine with you, wherever that might be.”

I mutter my agreement, and I move towards the door, stopping to take one last look in the mirror. I see my mother’s reflection in myself, and I know I can get through anything. Finally, placing my hand on the knob, I twist it and step through the threshold, ready to embrace the unknown.

**Age 21:**

Pacing outside my childhood home, my blue hair is flapping in the breeze. I look over at Misty’s doghouse, the tenant long gone after 11 years, and my heart yearns. I no longer hear Misty howling into the night to protect her family, or my mother’s tossing and turning safely under my barking best friend’s watchful eyes. I cannot smell the overbearing stench of freshly fertilized fields or exhaust from the tractor spraying pesticides. I taste neither the crisp air from the tree brush cut down years ago, nor the semi-filtered well water people swear up and down is bad for the body. I may never touch this soil again under bare feet and between toes, but something about it will always touch me.