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Pod 2

Getting Home

The sensation slithers around my small body, suffocating me like a boa constrictor does it's prey. My muscles tense behind my ears, on the fleshy part of my shoulders, and in a circle around my chubby, 4 year old waist. Pressure builds up in my forehead and, without thought, I feel a few warm tears cascade down my cheeks. I shake regardless of my intention to remain as still as possible. If you don't move, maybe he'll stop yelling and just drive normal. The attention isn't on me. It's like watching a storm through a foggy window; There is something surreal about it that makes you feel like you're not quite awake. They always play the same scene. Dad will open his mouth, out falling a slurred argument and a wave of toxic stench. Mama will follow, first with eloquent, rational statements, but eventually all reason will be lost under the sound of her sobs. She gets louder and so does he. I cup my small hands around my ears. If I hold tightly enough, it sounds like the ocean.

My hands are bigger now. I'm still sitting, trying to hear the waves, but the thunder has gotten louder and the window has disappeared.

"Tell me why you're crying Iza." My mom pulls my fingers from the sides of my head and tells me to look at her. I look around, coming back to the current reality. The evening sun glows through the clouds, blinding me through the rearview mirror. I'm sitting with her in the car, my

dad got out a few minutes ago, angry. My mom traded places with him after I called her crying and told her that I didn't want to be at home with him. We are on the way to my grandma's house.

"It happened again." I mumble

"What happened again?"

"We fought. I got mad at him, I don't really know why, he was just annoying me. Either way I snapped and told him to leave, so he did. It took him a while, but after about an hour he came back. He was mad."

"You should have called me, you know you shouldn't get in the car with him when he's like that."

I shudder as I recall what led me here.

"Get in the front seat." He orders

My empty stomach somehow manages to feel as though it might overflow. I know exactly what is going to happen, but I do what he says anyway. *You'll be fine.* I say to myself. *You just need to get home.*

I sit down with my arms crossed in a protective shield. His breath is warm and the smell of alcohol, moist, saliva mixed alcohol, catches in the back of my throat with each inhale.

"You're such an entitled brat."

He turns the key in the ignition.

My mom grabs my hand, still shaking from fear of not making it back safely.

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have been so mean to him. He was smothering me, but it’s not like he meant any harm.”

He can change so quickly.

Just this morning he took me out to breakfast and told me how proud of me he was. He wouldn’t even take a bite of the pancakes we ordered to share, saying I deserved the whole plate. He’s one of my best friends. We have so much fun together, teasing my mom, going to the beach, trying to find all the best ways to beat boredom in San Diego. Some days, the only thing that he wants to do is to spend time with me. Today, I wish he didn’t, and I wish he never had. It just makes it even harder when that seemingly indestructible love takes a back seat to all of his frustrations.

The next day, he got a call from work, never a good start, and as usual took out his anger on my brother. This time though, Gregory decided he was done, the same way my other brother Forrest did a few years ago. So he left, and after I snapped at him earlier, my dad decided it was the perfect opportunity to fall back into his bad habit.

“Don’t blame yourself mija. He shouldn’t have put you in danger.” I tear up again.

“But I shouldn’t have told him to leave. I just hurt his feelings.”

“His feelings have been hurt for a long time now Iza. Your dad has suffered a lot in his lifetime, but that doesn’t mean that it’s okay that we suffer too.”

I can feel my confliction scratching at the walls of my stomach. She is right. I feel my sadness turning into adrenaline. I let out a desperate wail as I go from wiping my tears to pressing my fingernails into my palms. I close my eyes and wander back into my memories. I always come

back to that one day. The boa constrictor wraps back around my body as I slip into my earliest memory.

“Mom, do you remember that time when I was little?”

I feel completely powerless. I am sitting in the back of his work truck. It's oversized to fit all the tools he needs for the construction site, and in it, I seem to shrink. I look out of the window, stretching my neck to see the road beneath us. I wonder how bad it would hurt to jump. My mom tries to control the car from the passenger seat. “Get your hands off the wheel!” My dad demands. He always spoke with an intensity that made you feel unsafe. He has never laid a finger on any of us, but in moments like now, I can't help but feel like he might. I am strapped into a booster seat, holding my brother's hand, like always, never saying a word. I just watch.

He pries off her fingers one by one to regain control of the car.

My mom yells back at him. “You're swerving all over the road! PULL OVER!”

“Diana, will you stop!” he says.

“No, you are going to kill us!”

“We're fine”

We swerve left into the next lane. The car next to us grabs onto their horn, letting out a prolonged honk. I whimper and break into a loud, snot filled cry. My brother squeezes my hand, trying to help me catch my breath.

“Ed! Slow down! You almost hit that truck!”

“But did I?” He slurs.

“No but-”

He cuts her off before she can finish, "I didn't think so."

"But you might hit the next one! Get off of the freeway. Please, your daughter and son are sitting right behind you. Look! You made your toddler cry. Just think about them. Please!"

"I can make my own decisions Diana, just sit back!"

My mom reaches her hand toward the back seat and grabs a hold of my foot, so little that it fits in her palm.

She turns her attention toward me. "It's going to be okay mijita"

I exhale in short bursts. My fear escapes in loud gasps, but I know I need to regain my composure. My diaphragm contracts and my lungs open up for a full breath. Air fills my body and my headache, still pulsating from the tension of holding back my screams, fades away. There is a burning on the tender skin below my eyes. I touch my icy fingertips against it, and even though it's only momentary, the bit of relief helps me to calm down. I come to a steady rhythm. Breathe in....2....3....4. Hold....2....3....4. Breathe out....2....3....4....5....6.... Repeat. My mom taught me how to do this a long time ago. She always told me, "No one can focus on their bad feelings while they're counting their breath. There isn't enough room in your brain to do both." So it became my routine.

All we need to do is get home

Finally, we pull over into a parking lot near the side of the freeway so that my dad can drop us off. The 5:00 sunlight and the exhaustion from so much crying have me practically asleep. I hear them arguing like a soft rumble in the distance. White noise.

"Come on Iza."

My brother's hand releases my own and I wake up startled. I'm defenseless.

I hear my dad yelling.

“She is my daughter! You can’t take her away from me!”

“Come on Iza. Get out of the car.” my mom motions.

I remember that my brother and I used to do this with the dog. We would sit him in between us and call him. We’d pat our laps, click our tongues, and make kissing sounds to try and get him to come our way. We wanted to prove to the other sibling that the dog liked us more. He always took a little while. He’d look us both in the eye and wag his tail. He’d keep turning around and around, trying to figure out the best decision. I keep sitting in my car seat, looking at my parents. Even though I know that when he is bad dad, he does things that make me scared and make mama cry, I also know that I love him. He’s just sad right now and he will get better. I imagine how warm he is, his strong cologne and how he makes me laugh. He doesn’t tell me what to do like mom does. No, he pushes me on the swingset or he reads funny poems to me before bed, like the one about the king who eats a peanut butter sandwich and can’t speak because it’s too sticky. He always gives me candy and helps me brush my teeth after I eat it. When I get tired of walking he’ll carry me on his shoulders. He will go back to good dad. Just like he always does. But I love my mama too. She smells like fresh laundry and flower petals, she yells at me but never scares me, she takes good care of me. I’d never choose one over the other. I want to be with both of them.

I stay in my car seat, my mom still calling me. She reaches her arms out to get me out of the back of the truck, too tall for me to climb out of without help. My brother is holding onto her waist, staring at me with a blank expression. I wonder why my dad isn’t fighting over him. My mom holds me in her arms. I wrap myself around her and hide my face in her sweater.

“Really?” He says, looking at my mom in utter disbelief. “Fuck you.” A cloud of exhaust catches in the back of my throat as he drives away full speed.

The sky is grey and I shiver. Light sprinkles tickle my skin; I wonder if it will rain soon. My mom asks a woman if she can make a call. She dials 3 numbers. I hear her telling the person on the phone about a drunk driver on the freeway. At the same time, my mom calls her own.

We spend the next week at my grandma’s house.

I look out of the passenger seat window, now tall enough to do so without stretching. My grandma’s house looks exactly the same as it did when I was four years old.

“Oh, I remember that time.” My mom grabs my hand and tries to comfort me.

“I just don’t know why he keeps doing this. He cried so much when he finally apologized. He always does.” I take a deep breath.

“He said he’d never do it again, but he did. He said he’d never drink again, but he did. He said he’d never hurt us or put us in danger, but he did.”

She looks down and sighs. “I know sweetheart, and he’ll get better just as soon as his job starts paying him again.”

“You’ve been saying that for 10 years.”

My mom frowns. “I know”

We sit in silence.

“Do you think I should ask him to leave?” She says.

“I don’t know mom. I just want this to be over.”

I lean over and give her a hug, laying my head on her sweater. It looks like it might rain.

“So do I.”