

She sits coolly on the couch, centered by our attention as though she were a story teller surrounded by impatient children. Her performance is soft yet commanding. It is difficult to shift our attention from her because of her extremely personable animation. I've always wished to have inherited this trait. Her intellectual wit nestles alongside her cool mannerisms, completely comfortable in almost any situation, stretching it just right to be only correct from her viewpoint. She is enviable, the way she can personalize every moment, every situation; the way she can twist facts to suit herself.

As she tells my boyfriend, Matt, the embarrassing stories of my childhood, she smiles and she grins. Her smile is contagious. For as long as I can remember, she could walk into a room of gloom and with a simple upturn of her lips; she could induce a smile in everyone who came in contact with her. The blush inducing stories mom tells quickly become the focus of everyone's attention, not because they are about me, but because they are told by her and her awe inspiring story telling skills.

We sit in my mother and fathers' living room, which is on the upper floor of a split level house in west Omaha. Matt has described the house as a model home, appearing un-lived in. I can see his rationality. My mother's OCD, at the stake of my father's sanity, does not allow for clutter or for mess. The formality of the house causes a fear of disturbing the order of it. Working at the hospital as Respiratory Therapists, both of my parents work twelve hour shifts overnight, seven pm to seven am. Every morning, as told by my father, mom will exhaustedly fret and complain over the one or two dirty dishes in the sink, the absolute mess of the house that to most would be considered the cleanest it could be, and the lack of appreciation and assistance she receives for "all that she does". This is typically followed by an exasperated, hurried, aggressive loading of the dishwasher, vacuuming of the entire house leaving not an inch of the carpet without "vacuum lines", and a huffy puffy attitude that we all learned to simply tune out.

As you enter the house, there are two options. You can either climb up the stairs to the living room, kitchen, dining room, bathroom and bedrooms or you can descend to the basement, garage, and laundry room. We sit in the living room at the left of the stairs. The room is flanked by a beige sofa and loveseat, beautifully detailed sofa tables and end tables, perfect lamps, and a theater style big screen television that my father had adopted after his brother replaced it with a new one. The walls are decorated with French décor, only adding to the expensive look of the model home. Mom had saved up and taken vacation time for my aunt to come from Oklahoma to help her decorate after visiting her made to order home in Altus.

Mom sits on the right end of the sofa, next to her oldest living sister Kathi. Dad sits on the loveseat, which sits to the right of the sofa, forming a 90 degree angle with the couches. I

sit, Indian style, nearly at Dad's feet, but facing Mom and Matt is behind me. Our children, three year old birthday boy Anthony and baby Maddie, make their way around the room, Anthony running, Maddie being handed off from one person to another, absorbing all the love she can get. As mom talks, my focus is solely on her. I cannot see Matt, for he is behind me but I can tell he is intently listening from his snickers and pats on my back reassuring me that though funny, I shouldn't be too ashamed of my childish vulnerable naivety of mind. Dad, while attempting to focus solely on the television, finds himself pulled in by mom's animated reenactments of my silly childhood blunders and I can see clearly that his eyes bounce back and forth between football and Mom. Occasionally, you can see a smile creep onto his face that vanishes as quickly as it was created at the refocus on football. Kathi, as usual, sits and studies everyone and their reactions while appearing to be lost in the children and their captivating innocence. Her reactions are mute and her face is slightly amused but only expresses extreme emotion when the kids touch her heart.

"One night, we were goin' out to dinner. Kevin (my dad) had been talking about elk hunting. We heard Cara sniffing in the back and turned around. She had huge tears rolling down her cheeks. I said 'Cara, what's wrong?' She goes, 'Why would anyone want to go elf hunting?'" Mom's vocal inflection rises and falls with the emotions I must have been feeling at that moment in my youth when I was sorrowfully misunderstood. At the mention of my tears, she uses both pointer fingers to show the location of the tears and as she repeats my words, she does so in the voice of a lost, crying little girl, only adding to my embarrassment but I must commend her on her performance. I cannot imagine that I sounded much different than she had projected to her audience.

She told a few more stories, smiling as though she wished she could return. I ponder for a moment if she would have been a worse friend and better mother. Mom did the best she could with what she had. Her success is envious and her ability to appear as she desires, to be viewed as the character she creates is awe inspiring. I wish, even for a day, that I could be the person I would prefer to be. Unfortunately, I cannot. This realization is what causes the riffs in our relationship.