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WRITER

MENU

When the Lights Go Out

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PROSE



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The first time I went to a therapist, she asked me to write and send her a journal entry about my earliest childhood memory. After agonizing over the vagueness of the assignment and repeatedly asking for more specific guidelines about what type of memory with little additional guidance (*At what age, about something meaningful or something banal? About my family or my identity? About my anxiety? Just tell me what to write!*), I finally gave in and just let my little black and gold pen take over.

I wrote about a night when the power had gone out in our house. I don't remember why it went out—maybe there was a storm, a power line knocked down, or maybe it was just one of those times our historic house with the slanted foundation and splintering wood floors, originally built in 1794 as a stagecoach stop, just needed a rest. I remember being frightened, clinging to my mother's leg as she tried to wrestle the three of us into the same room in the darkness. My father wasn't there—he was a machinist and often got called in to work at night to fix some mechanical issue. My mother produced candles and matches the way mothers always happen to produce items when they are needed—I'm sure they were stowed away in some cabinet out of her children's reach but in the darkness, it appeared she had pulled them out of the deep pockets of her dress, like a magician with never-ending sleeves filled with red silk ribbons and decks of cards and rabbits. In my memory, I couldn't see what her dress looked like, but I could feel its soft curves clutched in my little girl fist.

I remember my mother seeming so brave, so calm, so ready to handle this; that it wasn't a big deal, the power going out, having no light to see by, no music playing in the background on our stereo system. When Dad wasn't home, it would have been Prince, or Bette Midler, or maybe Tina Turner. She pulled the cushions off of the couches and chairs, grabbed blankets from the closet, and put the candles just out of our reach but close enough to cast a soft yellowish glow across the room. It was enough light to build a fort by, and that's all that mattered. We built a fort that to me was monstrous; it seemed to fill the dark room as I crawled around its mazes of pillow-tunnels, feeling my way along the fabric. I remember giggles and squeals, tickles and playful tackles with my brothers, and finding my mother and nestling my messy ponytail in that perfect little hollow between her chin and her chest, that little crease that was made for a daughter's nuzzling head. I remember feeling safe tucked into her that way, like she would let nothing harm me.

Now, I wonder if she truly felt strong and brave in that moment, if motherhood had given her that ability to grow courageous when her children were afraid, when she was probably wondering who could be lurking outside our house in the forest that surrounded us, whether we would get too cold in the night without heat, or whether all the milk in the fridge would go bad. Or perhaps motherhood just gives you the ability to put on a show for your children—a brave face in the darkness, a confident embrace, the steadiness of voice to convey that we are okay, I am okay, look at me, I'm not scared, Mommy is fine, you will be fine too.

Later, when my mother was dying, there was a moment in the hospital where the doctors and nurses surrounded her bedside and peppered her with questions about her eating habits, her smoking, her alcohol consumption, and her bowel movements, while my brother and I averted our gazes. Despite the public sharing of her most private bodily functions and immodest behaviors, she remained composed, answering each question thoughtfully, with precision, only interrupted at points by a fit of coughing. When the doctors left, we just sat there the same way we had when we were young and had broken her favorite lasagna dish, marinating in the guilt of our presence, our shame and discomfort. In that hospital bed, she had looked exhausted and I thought, *It must be exhausting, to put on such a show for these doctors.*

My father stood next to her bed, which had mostly been reclined almost to horizontal, but for the doctors' visit had been lifted up and angled towards the door of the room so that she didn't have a clear view of me and my brother in the back corner. I saw my father's rough machinist fingers squeeze down on her fragile hand, careful not to disturb the IV line. "Do you think they're satisfied with my answers?" she asked him. "Yeah," he said, "they seem like good doctors."

Mom said, "No, not them. Annie and Rich. Are they satisfied with my answers?" My father looked across the room at us with a desperate look in his eyes and then told her yes, we seemed satisfied, and squeezed her hand again.

She had not put this show on for the doctors; she had put it on for us, in the same way she had donned her "everything is fine, Mommy is going to be fine" face and tone that night our power went out.

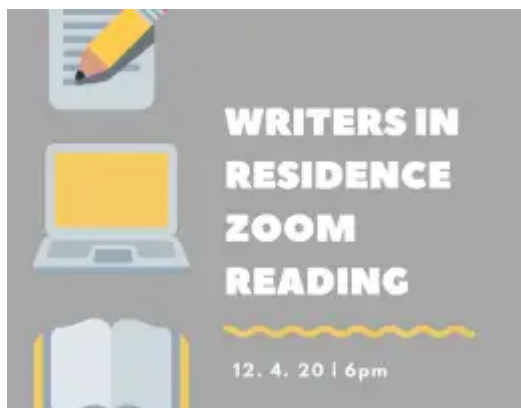
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